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Thanks to Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay, the Regional Secretary: Sahitya Akademi, Calcutta, with his permission we have been able to include in this issue a good number of papers presented at their literary functions and seminars. Our former student and now a young colleague, Sayantan Dasgupta, in particular among others in the Department, has rendered all possible help in the publication of the current volume. The Editor expresses his sincere gratitude to all of them.

VEDIC RITUAL AND POETIC SYMBOLISM

The archetypal patterns of situation, thought and feeling presented in the mythical poetry of the Samhitās are dramatized in the act of ritual in the Brāhmaṇas. Both myth and ritual are not only symbolic in nature but are also interdependent. A mythical image as well as a ritual is to be seen as a part of a total pattern of meaning. Just as a myth 'is not merely a story told but a reality lived',¹ similarly the ritual also embodies the lived human experience as it symbolizes the Creative Synchronization between organism and rhythms of its environment. In the Vedic poetry the word Yajña has been used as a mythical symbol implying an all-pervasive and all-inclusive expanse in which all the divine forces (Devatās) co-exist and co-ordinate. The *Ṛgveda* starts with a hymn to Agni whose functioning is qualified by the dimensions of Yajña, that symbolizes the whole cosmic process.

Yajña is a mythical term implying synchronized, productive or creative activity. The law that governs the entire cosmic operation is called Ṛta (derived from the root Ṛ to go) meaning the law of movement or creativity or the truth of Becoming with reference to the truth of Being, the central propelling force of pure-consciousness. That all the Devatās adhering to Ṛta are participating in the cosmic Yajña, has been beautifully presented in the hymns of the Veda. In the *Yajurveda* 19.80, all the divine forces are conceived as the active agents in the cosmic functioning similar to the process of a sacrificial rite by many persons. The Vedic mythology is woven around the Yājñika symbol. The following ṛk repeated in the Puruṣa and the Asyavāmasya hymns of the *Ṛgveda* and also occurring in the other Samhitās, describes the gods extending the process of Yajña through Yajña:

Yajñena yajñamayajanta devās tāni dharmāni prathamānyāsan.

Here the activity, its means and the result have all been identified. Yajña symbolizing the creative process involves three factors:

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- i) regard for the divine cosmic forces,
- ii) coordination of all the elements and components and
- iii) the fusion of the individual in the collective whole.

This is the basic pattern that applies not only to the macrocosm and microcosm but to every creative act. This archetypal concept of Yajña is presented throughout the Vedic poetry and the same has been replicated as an enactment in the Vedic ritual in the Brāhmaṇas. The sacrifice is the 'navel of the world' says the Asyavamsya hymn (Ayam yajña bhuvanasya nābhiḥ).² 'All this, whatever exists is made to share in the Yajña.'³ Those who do not participate do not exist.

Even a standing tree is symbolic of life and is participating in the cosmic Yajña. This is the poetic image presented in the *Rgveda* 3.8.1

Añjanti tvāmadhvare devayanto vanasapte madhunā daivyaena.
Yadūrdhvāstisthā dravincha dhattād yadavā kṣayo maturasyā upasthe.

The 8th verse of the same hymn presents the image of all the divine forces involved in the protection of the Yajña of the cosmic creation. 'May all the leading divinities in the form of twelve Ādityas, eleven Rudras, eight Vasus, the heaven, earth and the midsky (Antarīkṣa) together protect this cosmic Yajña and keep the banner of this Yajña flying high.'

Ādityā Rudrā vasavaḥ sunīthā dyāvākṣāmā pṛthivī antarīkṣam.
Sajoṣaso yajñamavantu devā ūrdhvaṁ kṛṇvantvadhvarasya ketum.

In Vedic thought, myth and ritual have both been regarded as very close to each other. Both are so homologous that even the ancient Indian scholars found it difficult to discriminate between the two. After a long discussion ultimately, Sāyanācārya, referring to Jaimini, said that both constitute the Veda. Moreover the basic principle is that the word and act are united together by the force of the mind. Speech is another form of Yajña (Vāg yajñasya rūpam, *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 12.8.2.4). All the Samhitās have ritualistic texts attached to them and those texts propound again and again that the poetry of the Veda is limitless in the scope of its meaning (Anantāḥ vai vedāḥ) and the mythical figures as well as the rituals have indirect or symbolic meaning ('Prokṣapriyā iva hi devāḥ pratyakṣadviṣaḥ' and 'Prokṣo vai yajñāḥ'). So, whatever

the form of the myth or the ritual it has an inwardly known aspect (Antarjñeya rūpa).

In the portions known as Arthavāda (the speculations about the meaning) the Brāhmaṇas have given exposition to the hidden meaning of the Vedic myth and the Vedic ritual. Both myth and ritual have underlying in them the truths regarding the inner nature of the universe as well as the human life. The various components of the Yajña are also supposed to have indicative associations.

The Vedic rituals are *Mysterium and Mimus*, Mysteries and Imitations; what anthropologists describe empirically (Pratyakṣeṇa) as 'sympathetic magic' is a metaphysical operation, an enchantment and a conjuration, not a religious, devotional service or 'prayer'⁴. So the myth (Devatākhyāna) and the ritual (Yajña) are not to be understood only in their physical sense as "the reference of 'Parokṣa' term is much wider than that of the 'Pratyakṣā' term; viz., in that of the many conceivable signs of or substitutes for the operating but unseen referent to 'pratyakṣā' term specifies only one."⁵

The Brāhmaṇa literature, in the process of interpreting the Vedic poetry and ritual and unfolding the archetypal symbols, presents various approaches. It must be re-asserted that it is due to the archetypal element that these could be understood at various levels. The Brāhmaṇas give the three-fold meaning i.e. the Ādhidaivata, the Ādhyātmika and the Ādhibhautika meaning of a ritual. The adhidaivata approach is the cosmological one, the Ādhibhautika interpretation incorporates the various aspects of an individual's relationship with others in the family, the society or the political set-up etc. The Ādhyātmika approach refers to the individual's physiological, psychological, intellectual and spiritual levels of existence. From the rhetorical point of view this could be termed as the symbolic action and the symbolists like Kenneth Burke (*The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*) have accepted three levels of symbolic action i.e., biological, familistic and abstract.

The broad division of the divergent meanings of the mythical symbol and the ritualistic symbol under these three categories in fact refers to the three confronting situations in which man is placed. The first situation is where man is in relation with nature, the whole physical surroundings; he and the forces of nature, time and space. The second

situation is where an individual human being stands in relation with other human beings and this could again form many patterns and situations of relationships *i.e.*, familistic, tribal, social, national or international. The third situation is when a person stands in relation to his own self, analyzing himself, his own emotions, thought, and ultimately his real self and is confronted with the greatest and the most crucial question, 'Who am I?' In fact in all the poetically created relationships the ultimate quest is to know one self as pitted against or placed along with other forces big or small.

We have already stated that the texts known as Brāhmaṇas have demonstrated the possibility of multifold interpretation of the Vedic mythical figures and the Vedic ritual along with its components. The Third Kāṇḍa (chapter) of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* describes and analyzes the Somayāga and the whole Yajña is viewed at various levels. In 3.5.3, it is viewed at microcosmic level. The components of the Yajñinika pattern are seen as corresponding to the various organs and faculties of a human being and the co-ordination of mind, intellect and speech is desired for the performance of the microcosmic Soma-Yaga. Similarly on the Ādhidaivika level the co-ordination of the forces of nature is spoken of and so on. The same applies to the description of other rituals also. The Aśvamedha is performed by a king whose sovereignty is established but is also performed by a person through complete control of his mind and senses. The Āraṇyaka texts and the earliest Upaniṣads like the Bṛhadāraṇyaka and the Chāndogya proceed towards the discussion on the reality of 'self' through the ritualistic patterns.

Interpreting the Aśvamedha (the horse ritual) on the macrocosmic lines, the sun is called the Aśvamedha due to its yearly circuit.⁶ At another place it is said, 'this alone is Aśvamedha, that is moon.'⁷ Against Prajāpati, who is described as the creator of the Aśvamedha is also identified with the Aśvamedha.⁸ Here the dawn, the sun, the wind, the fire, the year, the sky, the space, the earth, the stars, etc., are all delineated as the different parts of the sacrificial horse that is but the symbol of the all pervasive Cosmic phenomenon, force or energy.⁹ Even the performer of the ritual (Yajamāna) is called Aśvamedha.¹⁰ A nation (Rāṣṭra) is Aśvamedha¹¹ as it shines (Rājate iti Rāṣṭram) when the central creative force is victorious over the forces that would hamper its

progress. According to the *Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa*, Aśvamedha is symbolic of valorous creativity or projection¹², here all the dynamic forces become united (the word Medha derived from the root *Medh Saṃgamana* meaning co ordination) to achieve the luminous goal.

Referring to the deeper meaning of the Agnihotra, says the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* that a person performs the ritual without knowing the interior Agnihotra, it is as if he pushes aside the brands and pours oblation in the ashes.¹³ Agnihotra bereft of all the externalities is explained ultimately as offering of 'truth in faith',¹⁴ that means faith must consistently be supported by the human quest for the central truth otherwise it tends to become blind. The tenth chapter of the *Śaṅkhāyanārṇyaka* explains the Ādhyātmika or the inner Agnihotra and expounds that 'all the Devatās are indeed located in the man himself. (Om athāta ādhyātmikamāntaramagnihotram ityācakṣate. Eta ha vai devatāḥ purusa eva pratiṣṭhitāḥ). Agni (fire) is located in speech, vāyu (wind) in the vital breath. Aditya (sun) in the eye, Candramā (moon) in the mind, the Diśaḥ (the directions) in the ears, Āpaḥ (the waters) in the semen; to them indeed everything is offered. One who knowing this eats, drinks and offers food and the drinks to others becomes really satisfied and satisfies others. And then the microcosmic powers are linked with the macrocosmic powers i.e., the speech with Agni (fire), Agni with Pṛthivī (Earth), Pṛthivī with all that existed, exists and will exist on it. The vital energy (Prāṇa) with the Vāyu (wind), Vāyu with the mid region (Antarikṣa) and mid region with all that it pervaded, pervades and will pervade. The details of the Agnihotra with its ten aspects follow. The idea behind all this lengthy description is that the Agnihotra is all pervasive and every element of the cosmos is participating in it and is related with each other. The ritual of the Agnihotra is only a replica of the Agnihotra which is being performed constantly in the entire cosmos at various levels. Says the *Kāthaka Sāmhita* (6:7) that the 'creation is verily the Agnihotrā (Sṛṣṭirvā etadyadagnihotram). On the microcosmic level the vital energy is called the Agnihotram (Prāṇa eva Agnihotram *Mādhyandin Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 11.3.1.8)

Agnihotra is perceived by the *Sāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka* as going on inside the human being. The Prāṇa (vital air) is Āhavanīya, Apāna (downwards going vital air) is Gārhapatya, Vyāna (the vital air circulating in the whole body) is the Anvāhāryapacana, mind is the smoke, anger

the flames, teeth the burning charcoals, faith the water, speech the fuel, truth the oblation and the knowing self (prajñātmā) as the blissful essence, the 'Rasā Agnihotra is the first of all the rites. It is said that a person goes on performing the Agnihotra till he becomes incapable of doing so due to old age or is released by death. At every moment of life one has to invoke Agni, the energy principle to live life. Agni stands for the physical energy as well as mental energy, the will, the Saṅkalpa. The energy alone is manifest in the whole cosmos and that is Ādhidaivika Agnihotra. The vision behind the reoccurring pattern is that 'by giving alone one is fulfilled, becomes satisfied.' A co-ordination or synchronization of all the elements, energies and functions is the invariant basic vision of all the ritualistic motifemes of the Veda. The symbolic significance of the objects used in a ritual has been discussed. In the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka (10.64.1), the question raised is 'how man pots accomplish a Yajña?' 'Thirteen should be the number', is the answer and then all the thirteen pots (Pātrāṇi) with their names are not only enumerated but their symbolic meanings with regard to human faculties has been given.

To give another example we may refer to a pot named Mahāvīra that is used for boiling Ājya-oblation in a ritual called Pravargya. It is designed with three elevations which according to the Vedic texts correspond with three metres *i.e.*, Gāyatrī, Triṣṭubh and Jagatī and symbolically represent the three worlds (*Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*, 8.3.22-23).

Then the utensils used in the ritual have even been enumerated in pairs as to symbolically convey the philosophical idea that the world is dualistic in nature. Says the *Taittirīya Samhita* (1.6.8), 'The Adhvarya priest arranges the utensils of the sacrifice (yajña). The utensils of the Yajña are the Yajña. He arranges them in pairs (Dve dve sambharati)'. One who knows thus the ten utensils of the sacrifice or Yajña his sacrifice is set in order from the very beginning. The same symbolism is attached to these ritual-pots by the *Mādhyandina Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (1.1.1.22), that also presents these ten utensils in pairs; surpam and agnihotrahavanī, sphyam and kapālāni, śamyā and kṛṣṇājina, ulūkhala and mūsala, Dṛṣat and upala but makes a very significant statement regarding the pairing in the creative process and the Yajña after all symbolizes the whole of creation and every creative act. It says that these pots are ten and ten syllables are there in virāt meter. Virāt is the Yajña and Virāja alone

accomplishes this Yajña as the two together are indeed the strength (vīryam); when the two meet them the creative potency arises *dvandva* indeed is 'mithuna' and re-production. (...Yad dvandvaṁ dvandvaṁ vai vīryaṁ yadā vai dvau samrabhete atha tad vīryaṁ bhavati, dvandvaṁ vai mithunaṁ prajānaṁ mithuna-mevaitatprajānanaṁ kriyate.)

The word 'mithuna' conveys the idea of two complimentary components in a state of interdependence. Yāska derives the word from the root *mi* meaning to depend with the suffix *thu* or *tha* having the root *nī* or *van* as the last member. Thus 'mithūna' refers to those two who depend on each other or win each other (... sāmāśritāvanyo 'nyam nayato vāuuto va nirukta. 7, 29).

This archetype of complementarily or complementary dualism (Pūrakadvandva) has been presented in various ways in the Vedic mythopoeia as well as Vedic rituals and later analysed, discussed and elaborated in the philosophical systems, the purāṇas and the epics.

In fact, a very important Vedic ritual names 'Darśapūrṇamāśa' is devoted to expound this principle. It is performed on the full moon day of the month (Pūrṇimā) and the first day of the bright half of the month (Pratipad) when the moon is again seen in the evening in the sky. These two performances together make this one ritual and a person who performs the ritual on Pūrṇimā must also perform the ritual on Pratipad. The ritual is linked to the monthly course of the moon but it symbolizes the seeric perception of the complimentary dualistic situations in the whole of the cosmic functioning.

The perfect details about the performance of the ritual are presented in the Vedic texts and then we come across the various interpretations of the Darśapūrṇamāśa. In all these readings of the ritual, the basic idea of complimentary dualism finds reflection. It is very interesting to go through these multifarious alternative significations of the ritual. For instance the *Mādhyandin Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* says:

This alone is Pūrṇamā. The one (sun) who is shining on every day, that alone is perfect and the Darśa is the moon that is only seen; or the other says this moon alone is the Pūrṇamā, because after the full moon, the Pūrṇamāśi (full moon day) is named. This (the sun) is the Darśa, that is seen always and is heating and illuminating everything (11.2.4.1-2).

This Earth is Pūrṇamā. It is full, complete and perfect and the illumined sky (Dyau) is Darśa that one can only see (11.2.4.3). Or, the night alone is Pūrṇamā. The night is as if full, complete, all embracing and the day is the Darśa as it reveals everything. This is the macrocosmic explanation (Eṣa nu devatrā Darśapūrṇamasayormimāṃsā (11.2.4.4).

And then the microcosmic explanation follows with the words 'Athādhyātmam'. The Udāna (upward breathing) is Pūrṇamā; by it a person is filled and the Prāṇa is Darśa as if it is seen and they are the consumers of food and giver of food. And they are Darśapūrṇamasau. Prāṇa alone is the consumer of food. Through Prāṇa food is eaten and Udāna is Annaprada, by Udāna the food is given (to the whole body as if (11.2.4. 5-6). The other interpretation follows, 'Mind alone is Pūrṇamā, this mind as if is always full and the speech is Darśa because the speech is seen, that is, it alone gives expression to the thought (11.2.4.7).

At the other places in the Vedic texts the Darśapūrṇamāsa is explained with reference to other dualistic elements of complementary nature pertaining to scientific, social or psychological realms or spheres of life. Thus we find that the archetypal though is at the root of the Vedic mythopoeia as well as the Vedic ritualistic paradigms.

Regarding the Puśubandha ritual says the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (2.11) that the performer of the ritual is indeed the animal, the Paśu (Yajamano va eṣa nidānena yat paśuḥ) as through the ritual he has to kill and destroy the animal instincts residing in him and attain the personal purity and sublimation, In this way he cuts the snares, the Pāśas.

The meaning of Yajña on the basis of its derivation from the root Yaj with its triple meaning as if presenting a design for all creativity, has been discussed before. We come across another derivation of the word from the roots Yan and Jan meaning dynamic creativity or creative dynamism (sa yan jāyate tasmādyajño ha vai nāmaitadyadyajña iti, *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.9.4.23). In the same text we find the statements that Brahma is Yajña (Brahma vai yajñah, 5.3.2.4) or Ātmā is yajña (Ātmā vai yajñah (6.2.1.7). Trayī (the Vedas) is called the ritual of knowledge (Saiṣa trayī Vidyā yajñah, 1.1.4.3). Further it says that having mastered the art of signing one has known the Yajña (Gātum Vittveti yajñam

vittvetyevaitadāha, 1.9.2.28; 4.4.4.13). It suggests that rhythm and joy are the essence of Yajña. Thus we find that the Yajña is symbolic of the selfless, visionary, coordinated, dynamic and creative activity which could be at any level, in any sphere or dimension. The different rituals have great many resonances of apparent and deeper meaning of eternal value and universal applications.

In a myth or a ritual an ecstatic realm is created as in any form of creative art and all the forces are supposed to enter into that. 'O Agni, you are called upon to come to this peaceful ritual for illuminating everything. Come with the stormy forces.'

Prati tyam cārumadhvaram gopīthāya prahūyase,
Marudbhiragne āgahi. (*Rgveda*, 1.19.1)

All the gods participate in the Yajña; even the bad forces are present. The lokas (different regions), rivers, purodāṣa (cooked oblation), man with his wife, heaven and the Earth (Dyau and Pṛthivī) the Pitaras (manes) are all located there and nothing is left. A magical circle is created. The whole social structure and the world view is present. The myth and the ritual project a value system. Says Edmund Leach, 'We engage in rituals in order to transmit collective message to ourselves.'¹⁵

Further, 'Both myth and ritual have a tendency to become encyclopaedic. Man cannot do without the ritual and the myth is a central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual.'¹⁶ No vedic ritual can be performed without the Mantra. Aitareya Mahidāsa had said in the hoary past that 'the mantra gives meaning to the ritual as it is the eye of the ritual. It is the richness of the ritual, the richness of its form and beauty that the R̥gvedic verse supports the action that is being performed.'¹⁷

One has to find the ultimate truth also through Yajña, the Truth that is the centre and source of the ritual.

Avidante atihitam yadāsīdyajñasya dhāma paramaṁ guhā yat.
Dhaturdyutānāt savitūśca viśnorbharadvājo bṛhadṛācakre agneḥ.
(*Rgveda*, 10.181.2)

The act of Yajña has to be understood ultimately with reference to the inner self of man, and at the final stage just as the Yajña of

the cosmic activity merges into the supreme spirit (Paramātmā), similarly the microcosmic Yajña also merges into the individual self of the Man (jīvātmā) and we know, indeed, that the Jīvātmā and Parmātmā as well as the microcosmic yajña and the macrocosmic yajña are one.

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2. *Rgveda*, 1.164.35.
3. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 6.2.2.6: 'Yadidam kim caivam tatsarvam yajña abhuktam'.
4. Coomaraswamy, K. Anand, *Transformation of Nature in Art*, p. 125.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 122-23.
6. (a) *Mādhyandin Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 10.6.5.8: 'Eśa vāśvamedho ya cṣa (sūryo) tapati'.
- (b) *Ibid.*, 9.4.2.18: 'Asāvādityo śvamedhah'.
7. *Ibid.*, 11.2.5.1: 'Eṣa evāśvamedho yaccandramāh'.
8. *Ibid.*, 13.2.2.13: 'Prajāpatiraśvamedhah'.
9. *Ibid.*, 13.1.2.10.
10. *Ibid.* 13.2.2.1.
11. *Ibid.*, 13.2.2.16.
12. *Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa*, 2.266: 'Sa vā cṣa (Aśvamedhah) vīryameva yajño yarhi vā etena purejire, sarvameva vīryavadāsa'.
13. *Mādhyandin Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 11.2.4.7-8.
14. *Ibid.*, 11.3.1.4.: 'Na va iha tarhi kimcanasīdathaitadahyūtaiva satyam śraddhāyāmiti'.
15. *Culture and Communication*, p. 45.
16. Frye, Northrop. *The Archetypes of Literature*.
17. *Āitareya Brāhmaṇa*, 1.4: 'Etadvai yajuñasya samṛddham yadrūpasamṛddham yatkarmakriyamānamṛabhivadati'.

EZHUTHACHAN'S *ADHYĀTMA RĀMĀYAṆA* AND THE *RĀMĀYAṆA* TRADITION

Rāmāyaṇa is no more the name of a literary text in India, but the name of a whole tradition, a multiplicity of oral, written and performed texts, each equally authentic as a creation of popular imagination. In her critique of the televised *Rāmāyaṇa*, Romila Thapar, the well-known historian, comments that the *Rāmāyaṇa* does not belong to any one moment in history because it has its own history which is embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places. The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and intellectual concerns of each group were articulated. The versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* obtained in South Asia are so diverse that one has to specially look for the narratological resemblances that help us identify them as *Rāmāyaṇa*. In almost every version, Dasaratha has three wives; Rama is banished to the forest for fourteen years at Kaikeyi's request to her husband to redeem her boon; Bharata rules the kingdom on Rama's behalf; in the forest Surpanakha is mutilated by Lakshmana in response to her love-plea; Rama kills Bali, the monkey-king and Sambuka, the Dravidian sage; Ravana hears of Sita's beauty from his sister, abducts Sita from the forest with the help of the demon, Maricha; a war ensues between Rama and Ravana on account of this abduction; Rama is helped by Sugreeva, Hanuman and Vibhishana, Ravana's own brother; Rama retrieves Sita; but despite the test of fire which proved her purity, refuses to take her back as she had lived in another man's household; rumours force him to abandon Sita in the forest where under sage Valmiki's care she gives birth to the twins, Lava and Kusa; when she finally comes back Rama again subjects her chastity to test at which Sita prays to her mother Earth to take her back to her bosom; bereft of Sita, Rama too abandons the

world. While these recur in most of the versions, they differ profoundly in the settings, portrayal of characters, in the narrative details, in the presentation of episodes and in the relative significance of people and events.

A.K. Ramanujan, folklorist, scholar, poet and translator, even cites a story where the king of spirits tells Hanuman—who reaches the netherworld in search of Rama's ring that had disappeared through a hole— that there have been several Ramas and whenever one incarnation is about to be over, Rama's ring falls down. The king shows Hanuman a whole platter with thousands of rings and asks him to pick out *his* Rama's ring. He adds that his Rama too had already entered the river Sarayu, after crowning his twin sons, Lava and Kusa. This story is available in several languages: besides all mainstream Indian languages and many marginalised languages such as Tulu, and tribal languages like Bhili and Santhali, we find the tale in Annamese, Balinese, Cambodian, Chinese, Javanese, Laotian, Malayasian, Thai and Tibetan. Sanskrit alone has more than twenty five tellings in different forms. There is also a whole range of performed *Rāmāyaṇa* like *Rāmlilā*, *Rāmanāttam*, *Kathākali*, maskplays, puppet plays, shadow plays and other folk dance and drama forms. Besides there are paintings, sculptures, bas-reliefs, inscriptions and traditional hand-woven designs all of which provide different visual interpretations of the story.

I need not go into the illustrations of radical variations in the texts here as pioneering *Rāmāyaṇa* scholars like Father Camille Bulcke and Paula Richman have looked at hundreds of versions of *Rāmāyaṇa* including the Buddhist and Jain versions where the differences are prominently foregrounded as in Vimala Suri's Jain version where Ravana is a noble devotee of Jain masters, a learned man undone by a passion he has vowed against but cannot resist, or, in another Jain version where Sita is Ravana's daughter the ignorance of which traps the demon king in an Oedipal situation. It is Lakshmana and not Rama who fights Ravana here, Lakshmana and Ravana being incarnations respectively of Vasudeva and Prativasudeva. Ravana becomes the precursor of Devadatta, Siddhartha's angry and greedy cousin and his enemy from birth, and Rama, an incarnation of Bodhisattva, in the Buddhist versions while in the Thai tradition, Ravana is an earlier form

of Mara, the personalised embodiment of desire and death repeatedly defeated by the Buddha in his final life as Gotama. Folk versions also reveal how the basic tale has been coloured and modified by people's imagination.

Malayalam has its own *Rāmāyaṇa* subtradition. *Rāmaçaritam*, probably written in the twelfth century AD is supposed to be the earliest of *Rāmāyaṇa* in the language. Composed in indigenous metres with the specific features of the prosody in Dravidian languages, *Rāmaçaritam* consisting of 1814 quartrains in 164 sections is a perfect example of the *pattu* (literally, song) genre. It is a free rendering of the *Yuddhakaṇḍa* of Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* though the hero here is even more prominent than in Valmiki, and the style is grander. The dominant *rasa* is *vira*. The language is full of Tamilisms and the text shows the influence of the Tamil *Kāmba Rāmāyaṇa* and also of the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*. By the time the *Kannassa Rāmāyaṇam* was composed, probably around the fifteenth century, Malayalam language had become more sanskritised and closer to contemporary Malayalam. This is also a *pattu* rendering of the Valmiki *Rāmāyaṇa* in 3059 quartrains. This is the first complete *Rāmāyaṇa* in Malayalam. Niranam Rama Paniker, also known as Kannassa, has condensed the original in certain portions and added to it portions translated from other works in Sanskrit. This work stands out among *Rāmāyaṇas* in Malayalam for its mellifluous verses and charming word-pictures. Ayyappilla Asan's *Rāmakathappattu* that probably followed Kannassa's version, composed towards the close of the fifteenth century shows an overwhelming influence of the colloquial Tamil spoken in the bilingual areas of southern Travancore. This text was often recited in the Vaishnava temples in south Kerala to the accompaniment of a small drum called *chandravadyam*. Told in 3163 verses in 279 parts, this version of the Rama story never attained great popularity despite some of its beautiful descriptive passages.

Rāmāyaṇam Çampu attributed to Punam Namputhiri who probably lived in the latter half of the fifteenth century is the culmination of the highly sanskritised *mampravalam* tradition in the language. It is divided into twenty books beginning with the birth of Ravana (*Ravanotbhavam*) and ending with the ascension of Rama to heaven (*Swargarohanam*). It is composed chiefly in Sanskrit metres interspersed with short pieces

in indigenous metres taken for varieties of prose. The high-flown style reminds the informed reader of Bhoja's *Rāmāyaṇa Ćampu* or Anantabhatta's *Bharata Ćampu*. It is also full of quotations from Sanskrit classics as it was intended as a text for *pathakam*, a one-man dramatic performance held in temples. The work foregrounds the aesthetic rather than the religious aspect. The humorous, the erotic and the dramatic are evoked in abundance. The well-made verse, the evocative poetry and the perfect blend of diverse stylistic components charm the reader beyond measure. Another Ramayana in Malayalam is the *Irupathinalu Vritham* (Twenty-four Metres) whose authorship is attributed to Ezhuthachan. The work narrates the Rama story in different metres in 800 *slokas* some of which have great emotional appeal and a sweet syntactical simplicity. *Kerala Varma Rāmāyaṇam* is a simple and faithful translation of the first five cantos of *Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa* done by the young prince, Kerala Varma in the eighteenth century. The story of Rama from his birth to his coronation is told with great imaginative power, semantic skill and verbal felicity in twenty one *sargas* by Azhakathu Patmanabha Kurup in his neo-classical *Rāmāçandra Vilasam* that was the first *mahakavya* in Malayalam in the Sanskrit mode. *Ramanattam*, the *Ramayana Attakkatha* written by Kottarakkara Thampuran in the latter half of the seventeenth century divides the narrative into eight episodes that can be acted out independently in the *Kathākali* form.

There are scores of other *Rāmāyaṇa* in Malayalam of uneven poetic quality like *Rāmāyaṇa Manjari* by Oduvil Sankaran Kutty Menon, *Bhasha Rāmāyaṇa Ćampu* by Kadathanatt Krishna Variyar, *Rāmāyaṇam Attakkatha* by Mannathala Neelakantan Moose and *Rāmāyaṇam Drama* by Naluketil Krishna Menon besides several *Rāmāyaṇam thullalkathas* (meant for stage performance), *vanchippattus* (boat songs), *tharattu* (lullabies), *pattus* (songs) like *kalampattu*, *ammanappattu*, *oonjalppattu* and *kaikottikkalippattu* and *Samkshepas* (summaries). *Bālarāmāyaṇam* by Kumaran Asan is a simple poetic narration of the tale hailed as a children's classic. Among the translations, special mention may be made of Dr. S. K. Nair's translation of the Tamil *Kampa Rāmāyaṇa* and Vennikulam Gopalakurup's translation of Tulasidas's *Rāmçaritmānas*. There are several texts that belong to the repertoire of classical theatre forms in Kerala like *koothu* and *koodiyattam*, *Rāmāyaṇam Prabandham*,

and adaptations of Sanskrit plays like Bhasa's *Abhiṣeka* and *Pratīma Nāṭaka* and Saktibhadra's *Āṣṭyaryaṇāṭamāṇi*. Kunchan Nampiar has written eight *thullals* (tales in verse for performance) based on different episodes in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The epic has also been adapted to *tholppavakkoothu*, shadow-plays with leather puppets played in Kali temples in Palghat district. Sanskrit texts by Dingnaga, Ramabhadra Dikshitar, Bhavabhuti, Bhasa, Murari and Saktibhadra have also found excellent translators in Malayalam. There are too several folk versions like *Patala Rāmāyaṇa*. In this version, Patalaravana, the demon lord of the nether world wants to help his friend Ravana of Lanka when he was fighting his losing battle. He abducts Rama and Lakshmana to the nether world. Hanuman comes to know of this and, after a series of adventures and some romantic episodes, kills the abductor and rescues his masters who continue their battle against Ravana. The *kilippaattu* based on this story was probably composed in the eighteenth century. *Seetadukham* (Sita's sorrow) is also of the same period. Here, after Rama's return to Ayodhya, the three mothers-in-law ask Sita to paint a picture of Ravana who they had never seen. Sita reluctantly complies. The mothers-in-law who were jealous of the favours Sita received from her fond husband bring this picture to Rama's notice to arouse his suspicion. Rama asks Lakshmana to take Sita to the forest and kill her. Lakshmana, unable to murder Sita, places her in the care of an ascetic, kills a salamander and shows his blood-drenched sword to Rama. This convinces Rama, but not the women who knew it was a beast's blood. Lakshmana is sent back to the woods. This time he cuts Sita's little finger and brings that blood to the palace. This time the women say it is a man's blood. Lakshmana irked by their remarks asks them to cut their own limbs and see if that blood matched this. Rama, however, is overcome by remorse at the truth and goes to the hermitage to see his sons. Sita then disappears into a chasm. Rama tries to pull her back but only gets a single strand of her hair.

There are, as far as is known, one hundred and ninety-seven important independent works based on *Rāmāyaṇa* in Malayalam, nineteen translations and twenty-four works of prose. There are also several representations in Kerala's painting, sculpture and poetry. The mural paintings of Tripunithura palace depict Rama's story from his birth upto his triumphal return from exile. The Rama temples of Triprayar and

Tiruvilvamala have selected episodes from the epic sculpted in wood around the *sanctum sanctorum*. The entire *Rāmāyaṇa* story is carved in on forty wooden panels in the Patmanabhapuram palace in Thiruvananthapuram. Raja Ravivarma too has paintings based on *Rāmāyaṇa*. Of the poems the most significant is Kumaran Asan's *Çintāviṣṭaya Sītā* (The Thoughtful Sita) where the abandoned Sita interrogates the whole value system that led to her tragedy and directly accuses Rama of cowardice and heartlessness.

It is impossible to list all the poems based on the episodes from *Rāmāyaṇa*. *Seetadevi* (P. Kunjiraman Nair), *Innathe Sandhya* (Today's Dusk, Sugatakumari), *Samarpaṇam* (Dedication, Punaloor Balan), *Tamasakananangalil* (In the Woods of Tamasa, Pala Narayanan Nair), *Lakṣmaṇan* (Vishnu Narayanan Namputhiri), *Vibhīṣaṇan* (Balamani Amma), *Rāvanaputri* (Vayalar Ramavarma), *Sabari* (Ayyappa Paniker), *Ahalyā* and *Jānaki*, *Poru* (Come, Janaki, K. Satchidanandan) are some of the more well-known of them. Many of these poems assume radical stances, reading Rama's story from the points of view of Sita, Ravana, Sabari, Sambuka and Urmila. Among the famous plays based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* are *Sithasayamvaram* (Kodungallur Kunjikkuttan Tampuran), *Mandodari* (Sardar K.M. Paniker), *Athhūta Rāmāyaṇam* (M. Neelakantan Moose), *Sītāharanam* (N. Sankaran Nair) *Bhasha Rāmāyaṇam* (A. Govindappilla Chattambi), *Ravanaputran* (Pallathu Raman), *Lankam Ravana Palitam* (Madassery Madhava Variyar), *Ramarajyabhishekam* (E.V. Krishna Pillai) *Pushpavrishti* (Thikkodiyan), and the trilogy, *Kāṇṇana Sītā*, *Saketam* and *Lankalakshmi* (C.N. Srikantan Nair). This trilogy interrogates the whole ethics of *Rāmāyaṇa* from a humanist point of view. (Aravindan, the avant-garde film maker of Kerala has made a film based on *Kāṇṇana Sītā* where Rama is depicted as a tribal, Urmila and Sambuka are foregrounded and Sita is represented as Nature.) Sara Joseph too interrogates *Rāmāyaṇa* from a feminist point of view in her series of stories based on the women characters in *Rāmāyaṇa* like Sita, Mandodari, Surpanakha, Manthara, and Sambuka's wife.

II

It is in the background of this continuing *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition of Kerala that we read Ezhuthachan's *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇam* today. We know

little about Ezhuthachan. His real name is said to be Ramanujan though other names have also been suggested. It is said that he had become a disciple of Ramanuja, the Vaishnavacharya who propounded *Viśiṣṭhādvaita*. Ezhuthachan literally means the father or leader of writing and is probably a title given to him by the people of Kerala who hold him in great esteem as the author of *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Śrī Mahābhārata*. (Now it has become a common appellation for teachers in the villages who initiate children into the alphabet). Scholars agree that he lived in the sixteenth century and was born in Tirur in the Ponnani taluk of Malabar in Kerala in a Sudra (Chakkala Nair) family who are traditionally oil-mongers but are now mostly village teachers. Idassery Govindan Nair, a major twentieth century Malayalam poet, paying tribute to Ezhuthachan who is worshipped as the father of Malayalam language, comments that it was after piercing with his stencil the oppressive Varna system that denied Vedic education to the Sudras that Ezhuthachan wrote the *Rāmāyaṇa* that is still the first source of Vedic education to Malayali children. The compound where his house had once stood has been preserved still as a sacred memorial and has been developed into a cultural centre where children are initiated into the alphabet of Malayalam and a regular Thunchan Festival is held annually. He is believed to have died in Chittoor where in a *gurumatt* his stencil is still worshipped. He knew Tamil well and is likely to have done some travels in south India. He also knew the Telugu alphabet as the Raja of Ambalappuzha seems to have sought his services to decipher a Telugu manuscript on *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*. There are hundreds of legends about him — that he was born to a Nambudiri in a Nair virgin who agreed to be his companion so that an auspicious hour for giving birth to a great soul would not slip past her, that Goddess Saraswati herself had filled up the missing portions of the *Devī Māhatmyam* for him when he was entrusted that job, that he was the reincarnation of a *gandharva* who had witnessed the *Mahābhārata* war in his previous birth, that he taught a monkey to speak, that the Brahmins who were jealous of his scholarship and creative genius seduced him into the habit of drinking by sorcery so that he would be inebriated and unable to write or teach and yet he wrote *Rāmāyaṇa* in that condition — all these legends only point to the admiration that Malayalis hold for the genius of Ezhuthachan.

There are many conjectures as to why Ezhuthachan chose *Rāmāyaṇa* as his basic text for recreating the Rama story. One explanation is that the King of Ambalappuzha asked him to do a version of the Telugu *Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*. Another is that there already existed many translations of *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* in Malayalam and it would be superfluous to do yet another version. There is even a legend that a Brahmin who was unhappy about the lack of recognition for his work — *Adhyatma Rāmāyaṇa* — was met by a *gandharva* at Gokarnam who directed him to Vyasa. But Vyasa who was angry at the intrusion into his privacy cursed the *gandharva* to be reborn as a man. That was Ezhuthachan who wanted to help the Brahmin by translating his work. But the times in which Ezhuthachan lived would better explain his choice. Valmiki probably lived in a heroic age that revelled in the romance of war consequent upon the unsettled state of society and looked upon its heroes as objects of emulation. Ezhuthachan lived in an age of Bhakti — Poonthanam and Melpathur, the great Bhakti poets of Kerala were his contemporaries — tired of war and its horrors and was badly in need of a spiritual message to soothe the agony of the human soul that had realised the futility of mutual annihilation. This does not mean that Ezhuthachan ignored *Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa* altogether: on the other hand he has made wise use of it in narrating certain episodes. He has also drawn freely from earlier *Rāmāyaṇa* in Malayalam as also the multitude of legends that had gathered round the personality of Rama over a long stretch of time. In this he is not different from other *Rāmāyaṇa* poets like Kamban, Pampa, Molla, Tulasi, Balaramadasa, Krittibas, Madhav Kandali, Guru Gobind Singh and others who never cared to do a word-to-word translation of any existing text. Adaptation, summary, elaboration, selection, rejection, addition, substitution: all these strategies were used by these poets according to the nature of their genius, the specific genius of the language, the time they lived in and the people they addressed, aesthetic considerations playing a decisive role in whatever they finally produced.

The original *Adhyatma Rāmāyaṇa* is said to have been authored by Veda Vyasa himself as it is embedded in the *Brahmānda Purāṇa*. But the text used by Ezhuthachan was probably composed by some unknown author in 14-15th centuries. It has 3643 verses — 4200 according

to another estimate. The main events are taken from Valmiki while the accent is on the philosophical and devotional aspects. The writing of the text is sometimes attributed to the intervention of Ramanandis who considered Rama the infallible Brahma himself unlike in Valmiki where Rama is a royal hero and is sometimes subject to human foibles. The entire text here becomes a Vedantic allegory. Dasaratha symbolises the chariot of the human body with its ten *indriyas* — the five sensory organs and the five working organs. He attracted three *gunas* in the form of the three wives, Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi. His four sons represent the four *purusharthas*, namely, *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. Sita is Vaidehi — *videha* means without body or consciousness of the body. Sita thus is wisdom that marries *dharma* in the form of Rama. Thus the city where they live becomes *ayodhya* — impregnable and invulnerable. Ravana represents selfishness, jealousy and ego and Rama's battle against him to retrieve Sita is a battle to recover wisdom carried away by ego, jealousy and selfishness. He is helped in this attempt by Sugriva, who can distinguish good from bad (he has *viveka*) and Hanuman who represents courage. The greatest obstacle in retrieving Sita is the ocean which is nothing but *moha*, the illusion of desire that is finally crossed with Hanuman's help. Crossing the ocean they encounter three *gunas* — *rajas* in the form of Ravana, *tamas* in the form of Kumbhakarna and *sattwa* in the form of Vibhishana. Finally Vibhishana who represents good is crowned king. The reunion of Rama and Sita is a moment of pure *brahmajnana*.

The first part of Ezhuthachan's *Adhyāṭma Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Bālakaṇḍam*, includes a description of the cosmic and celestial appearance — *rahmasvarupa* — of Lord Rama, an exposition of the greatness of *Rāmāyaṇa*, the dialogue between Parvati and Siva (*Uma-Mahesvara Samvada*), Siva's telling of the story of *Rāmāyaṇa* for Parvati, Rama's *avatar* as a human being to remove *asuras* like Ravana, Rama's childhood, services to Viswamitra and the killing of Tadaka, the story of Ahalya's emancipation and the *svayamvara* of Sita. The *Ayodhyakandam* has the abortive preparations for Rama's coronation, exposition of the *ratna* of Rama and Sita, the journey to the forest, entry to Chitrakuta, the death of Dasaratha, Valmiki's story, the conversation between Bharata and Rama and the entry to the *ashrama* of Atri. The *Aranyakandam* describes Rama's entry into the *maharanya*, visit to

Agastya, entry into Panchavati, encounter with Surpanakha, the killing of Maricha, the abduction of Sita, Rama's search for Sita, the meeting with Jatayu, the story of Kabandha and the meeting with Sabari. The Kishkindhakandam features the meeting with Hanuman, the pact with Sugriva, the killing of Bali, the advice to Tara, the coronation of Sugriva, Lakshmana's meeting with Sugriva, Sampathi's exposition of Rama's secret and Hanuman's volunteering to go to Lanka. The Sundarakandam deals with Hanuman's crossing of the ocean overcoming all the obstacles to meet Sita, Ravana's love plea to Sita and her refusal, Hanuman's meeting with Ravana, the burning of Lanka and Hanuman's report to Rama. Yuddhakandam, where Ezhuthachan mostly follows Valmiki, deals with the preparations for war on either side, Ravana's conversations with Kumbhakarna and Vibhishana, the *Setubandhana*, Suka's story and the conversations of Ravana with him, the killing of Kumbhakarna and Atikaya, the victory of Indrajit, the search for the divine drug, the arrival of Kalanemi, the killing of Meghanada, Agastya's arrival, the killing of Ravana, the coronation of Vibhishana, the return to Ayodhya, the coronation of Rama, his golden governance and the virtues of listening to Ramayana. This main text is followed by the *Uttara Rāmāyaṇa* in three chapters, which, some scholars believe was not written by Ezhuthachan as its style is somewhat different and the language a bit coarse.

III

One major deviation — as far as the narrative aspect is concerned — in *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* from Valmiki's text is the introduction of the concept of *Maya Sita* — the illusory or shadow-Sita. Real Sita disappears into fire before the golden deer episode, leaving only her shadow. Tulasidasa also accepts this conceptual innovation. The *doha* 23 of Aranyakanda says:

When Lakshmana had gone to the woods to gather roots, fruits and bulbs, Sri Rama, the very incarnation of compassion and joy spoke with a smile to Janaka's daughter: 'Listen, my darling, you have been staunch in the holy vow of fidelity to me and are so virtuous in conduct: I am going to act a lovely human part. Abide in fire until I have completed the destruction of the demons.

No sooner had Sri Rama told her everything in detail, than she impressed the image of the Lord's feet on her heart and entered into the fire, leaving with him only a shadow of hers though precisely of the same appearance and the same amiable and gentle disposition. Lakshmana too did not know the secret of what the Lord had done behind the curtain.

In *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, Sita emerges from fire at the end of the war when the shadow-Sita enters it as had been planned. This new concept seems to perform two functions: one, to save Rama from the charge of the fire-test he ordered for Sita, and two, to save Sita herself from the accusation of having lived in another man's house for a while. Thus the whole charge brought against Sita by Rama and the test of fire he gives her become pure drama, keeping in tact the purity and integrity of both the divine characters. This is clearly the intervention of Bhakti in Rama's human tale.

There are also other minor variations. Ravana treats Sita with the reverence due to a mother and Rama establishes a Sivalinga at the site of the *setu*, the bridge to Lanka. Another characteristic of *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* is the presence of several beautiful hymns. In fact Ezhuthachan never uses a single name to qualify Rama, it is always a garland of synonyms beautifully strung together to form a mellifluous hymn.

Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa also casts Rama in the role of a spiritual teacher. There are four occasions when he plays the sage. He teaches knowledge, devotion and detachment to Lakshmana in response to his questions as also the methods of worship and the way of emancipation. In response to Kausalya's query, Rama teaches her the three *yogas* of *karma*, *jnana* and *bhakti*.

Rāmagītā that forms part of the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* and appears as the fifth chapter of the *uttara kāṇḍa* expounds *advaita vedānta* for popular understanding in the form of a conversation between Rama and Lakshmana. It repeatedly propounds the doctrine that Rama is Brahman the Absolute and Sita is his *maya-sakti* or *prakṛiti* thereby raising the personality of Rama to the highest possible and providing a firm basis to Rama worship. In orthodox circles, *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* is considered a *mantraśāstra*, a sacred book, each of its verses being a *mantra* devoutly repeated in a ceremonial way. Let me give just one example to the kind

of philosophical exposition found in *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*. This one appears in the Kishkindha kanda. Sage Chandramas is talking to Sampathy about *atman*.

Because man thinks of his body as himself, *karma* becomes operative. This I-sense, which binds one to the body is beginningless and is a result of ignorance. In itself it is inert without consciousness, but being in association with the reflection of pure consciousness, it appears conscious, just as a red-hot piece of iron appears hot and shining in association with fire. Because the body is in identification with this I-sense, the body too appears endowed with consciousness.

Dominated by the I-sense, the *atman* (embodied soul) thinks of himself as the body and becomes subject to the cycle of births and deaths and to the consequent experience of happiness and misery. The *atman* is changeless but because of this false identification, he thinks: 'I am the body and I am the doer of various actions'. Thus the embodied being becomes the performer of many actions and is helplessly bound by their consequences. He finds himself fettered and wanders hither and thither in this transmigratory cycle as a victim of sinful and meritorious actions. He makes the resolution: 'I have performed many meritorious actions like sacrifices and charities. I shall therefore attain heaven and enjoy heavenly felicities.' By the same sense of identification, he enjoys these heavenly pleasures for a long period, and then when the effect of these virtuous deeds has dwindled, the same power of karma sends him down, however much he may dislike it.

Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa resorts to the principle of *anadi avidya* (the beginningless error) to explain the world process. The world is shown as the effect of *maya* (Nescience, or ignorance). The poet of *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* resorts to fascinating didactic tales in order to explain *vedantic* principles. Let us see some examples: A frog is being swallowed by a snake. It is going to die, it knows, yet puts out its tongue in the hope of catching insects. Similarly man is being swallowed by the serpent of Time, still he runs after transitory sensual pleasures instead of worshipping Rama. Another: A dog bites a dry bone thinking there is meat there. It goes on biting until its mouth bleeds. Still it thinks the blood is from the meat in the bone and bites deeper. Man

foolishly thinks that happiness lies in external objects and hankers after that. This results in wastage of body and mind. But if he leaves the bone alone, he will find happiness within.

IV

Ezhuthachan's *Rāmāyaṇa* is sung by a parrot who is invoked repeatedly to go on with the story. At the very beginning, after the prayer to Rama, we find these lines:

O, lovely bird that has come
reciting Sri Rama's names,
narrate to me the tale
of Rama without hesitation.

Some say this strategy was resorted to as he as a Sudra was not authorised to deal with the Vedic philosophy that forms the philosophical core of the text. The method may have come from the Tamil tradition where poets like Panchachamarakkani have resorted to it or from Banabhatta in Sanskrit where the tale of *Kādambarī* is told by a *suka*. Another explanation is that he is propitiating Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning as the parrot adorns her lap. Some say it is a way of invoking Suka Maharshi, the mythical boy-saint and the author of *Bhāgavatam* as his name also begins with *suka*. May be Ezhuthachan also thought of the mystery that surrounds the bird as it flies to regions beyond human reach as also the quality of its sound. Whatever the source and the reason, it works well as a poetic device encouraging indirect narration like Sanjaya narrating the battle of Kurukshetra to Dhritarashtra in *Vyāsa-Bhārata*. The strategy also legitimises the poet's enriching deviations from the Sanskrit text. He uses his creative imagination freely, goes deeper into the minds of the citizens of Ayodhya and creates a human situation out of it at the same time creating a complete word-image of Rama, typical of devotional poetry that carries head-to-foot descriptions of the deity as an instrument of meditation. In his elaborations and condensations he was guided by the sentiment in the context. Throughout he fights shy of overtly erotic contexts and crudities in character. For example while the original carries a long description of the four months of Rama's dalliance with Sita after their re-union in Ayodhya, Ezhuthachan simply

says that it was spring time and the Lord spent four happy months in love-play with Sita and she became pregnant. At times he adds lines that reflect his insight into the ways of the world. For example, when Bhadra reports to him how all his subjects are praising his governance, Rama instead of encouraging this sycophancy asks him to report also the negative opinions about him when Bhadra comes out with the criticism about his accepting Sita who had spent time in Lanka in Ravana's confinement. Rama tells Bhadra:

You may stop reporting those good things about me. It is the nature of the world to hide the bad and only speak about the good in front of the king. But it is always better to speak the truth. Virtue never exists alone, it is always mixed with vice. Now tell me the bad things spoken about me.

Sometimes the poet adds lines to heighten the sentiment. After Lakshmana leaves Sita in the woods, some young *rishis* see her and describe her to Valmiki:

Even the trees and creepers are in mourning seeing the sorrow of that lotus-eyed. The river has stopped flowing and the sun stands perplexed. Even the wind has become still, the wind-eaters (*pavanaasanan*, snakes) remain in their hollows and the birds have fallen silent on the trees. Please save her, o, the one for whom meditation is bliss!

When Sita is asked by Rama once again to take a vow of chastity before the public during the *Aswamedha*, Valmiki makes Sita, one with her head bent and eyes downcast: but Ezhuthachan's Sita sits looking straight at Rama, invites the fourteen witnesses of the world to declare her loyalty to her Lord and then, with a sense of rightful claim indicated by the expression, *medineeputri*, the Earth's daughter for Sita and also her addressing the earth as *matave* (O, mother) asks Earth to accept her back. The Goddess then comes and carries her in on a jade throne. Ezhuthachan has also freely used expressions and passages by other poets wherever he found the original lacking in force or poetic felicity. He uses passages from the *Bhoja Çampu*, *Kannassa Rāmāyaṇam*, Rajasekhara's *Bāla Rāmāyaṇam* and of course, *Valmiki Rāmāyaṇam* freely with a rare sense of propriety. Ezhuthachan also shifts from one metre to another as he moves from one *Kāṇḍa* to the

next with the same sense of propriety. He uses Dravidian metres like *keka*, *kakali*, *kalakanchi* and *annanada* with great felicity to evoke the correct mood. The poet can never forget the total spirituality of the work that lends a seriousness of tone and purpose to the epic. This also prevents sentiments like love and humour from coming into full play.

The poet is constantly aware of his status as a devotee and of the sublimity of Rama, the divine, overall *atman*. *Bhakti*, *karuna* and *veera* are the dominating *rasas* in Ezhuthachan's *Rāmāyaṇa*. One can hardly read two pages of Ezhuthachan's work before he is struck by the poet's devotional fervour. The mere mention of Rama conjures up the figure of the idol before him, and a series of epithets follows to transform into words what the poet experiences in his mind. If there is an occasion for a praise of the hero, the poet identifies himself completely with the character who does it and makes it as elaborate as possible. All the divine attributes that proclaim Rama as the Supreme Being, along with a review of his achievements and graces, particularly the God's personal interest in his devotees, find a place in it. Almost every alternate page of *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* contains a *stotra*. In spite of the uniformity of God's attributes, Ezhuthachan's *stotras* are never monotonous owing to his amazing command over the vocabulary and the intensity of his emotional fervour. The original *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* was also intended to sing the glories of Rama the God, but the reader never derives so lively and abiding an impression of this as he does from Ezhuthachan's work. This transformation of a rather forbidding philosophical work into a poetic composition of rare beauty was possible because of Ezhuthachan's sure hold on the springs of Malayalam language, his knowledge of Sanskrit and Tamil that are the main components of the language, his deep sense of sound and rhythm, the intensity of his feeling and above all his high poetic imagination. The suffering of Dasaratha, Rama and Sita come through in the epic with their full emotional and human import. The laments of Dasaratha after Rama, Sita and Lakshmana had left for the forest, the grief of Tara, the passionate search of Rama for Sita after her abduction asking every beast and bird and tree in the woods to provide news of his beautiful beloved-these are all occasions for Ezhuthachan to humanise the tale and articulate the profound pathos in our existential

situation. For example, here is the sad Dasaratha asking Sumantra who comes covering his face in his garment and wiping his tears:

Where is Raghava now and his
brother and Janaka's daughter?
What message has Rama sent
for this shameless sinner?
And what more has Lakshmana said,
and Sita, Lakshmi's own equal?
O, Rama, seat of all virtues,
O, Lakshmana, o, Sita,
O, the tender child of Mithila's king!
I have no luck to have you near me
and die seeing your blissful face.

Dasaratha's death is also equally pathetic. He dies blaming Kaikeyi for the partings, his thoughts lingering on Rama. Another example is Tara mourning Bali:

"What use to me is now my son,
my land and life upon this earth?
I shall embrace death with my lord."
Then rushing to her husband's body
lying bathed in blood and dust
she fell at his feet with her son.
"Kill me too with your arrow," to Rama she cried.
"This parting from me my husband can't bear
and sending me along with him you will
derive the merit of gifting a bride.
Have you not, Rama, suffered and known
what parting from a beloved means?
And you Sugreeva, live long now
with no grief and with a kingdom"

Devotion to Rama does not prevent the poet from sympathising with those he has brought suffering to. Ezhuthachan has combined divineness and humaneness without prejudicing either. Rama's human feelings are explained by his being *mayamanusha*.

The poet is equally good at describing heroic situations. *Veera* comes through in his descriptions of Jatayu intercepting Ravana — the sea rolls into majestic waves and the mountains get uprooted as

his wings raise a wind and the bird himself looks like a winged mountain.

Ezhuthachan's poetic powers are also seen in some of his famous descriptions as when he speaks of Rama's breaking of the bow at Janaka's palace: the princes tremble like snakes as they hear the sound of the breaking bow like a peal of thunder while Sita herself feels happy like a pea-hen when she hears the same sound. Again her garlanding Rama is described thus:

The golden-hued princess arrived
resplendent in her ornaments of gold
and stood shyly before the Lord.
She then garlanded him
first with the blue lotuses of her eyes
and only then with the wedding garland.

This garlanding with the *netrolpala-mala* is not probably there in any other Ramayana.

Ezhuthachan is equally good in describing battles. Presenting the war between Rama and Ravana he says:

The whole world shook with fright when they saw
the way Rama and Ravana were fighting.
The wind withdrew and the sun vanished,
in terror the earth shuddered and oceans rose.
And the inhabitants of the netherworld
trembled with fear.
'If ocean fights with ocean,
and the sky confronts another sky,
that will pale before this war,' so said
the gods who watched this gruesome fight.

Humour is very rare in the text because of its high seriousness. Yet there are some occasions of humour like when Bali on his deathbed asks Rama why a hero like him had to kill a mere monkey deceitfully like a hunter. What honour had he earned from that act? And he concludes sharply: 'Monkey's meat, you surely know, is unfit for man to consume'.

Ezhuthachan's poetic propriety is also seen in some other deviations of his from the original. He omits the long sermon Lakshmana preaches to Vibhishana when he mourns Ravana as such a long philosophical

discourse is sure to be unbearable to someone in bereavement. On the other hand he introduces *adityahridaya* hymn that Agasthya delivers to Rama when he is shaken in spirit and is in need of some invigorating elixir to go on with the battle with unabated will.

V

A few words also about Ezhuthachan's characterisation: his Rama, as we have seen is an ideal for men as well as gods. He is compassionate, magnanimous, powerful, farsighted and deep. Even as a child he is painted as pleasing to all the senses, a paragon of beauty, grace and perfection. As he grows, his divine dignity ripens into equanimity of temper and princely conduct with an unerring devotion to the rules of public conduct prescribed by the *sastras*. Look at his encounter with Parasurama. When Valmiki's Rama heard the challenge of Parasurama, he 'kept back the hot words that rose to his lips'. In the original *Adhyatma*, Rama 'angrily snatched away the *vaishnava* bow from his hand'. But in Ezhuthachan's version, Rama meets the challenge with a graceful smile and then addresses a few polite words whose hidden meaning is more poignant than the arrow he subsequently releases. He asks:

If great and magnanimous men like you treat boys like me in this fashion, what safety do they have? And how are they to perform their duty according to their tradition or *dharma*? If once your worthy self desires a thing it meets no obstacle. A blind boy like me cannot be expected to fare well in *gunabandha* (the blending of the *gunas*) at any time. Though born of *kshatriya* race, I have no skill in archery. I make no distinction between a friend and a foe. Nor am I capable of killing the enemy. Even the destroyer of Antaka cannot go against your decision. Still please give me your bow. I shall try my hand at it. Do not be offended if I fail.

This is followed by a beautiful description of Rama's infantile grace and demeanour, which defies translation and raises the ironic and satirical tone of the speech to its boiling point.

Rama's speech to Kaikeyi after her diabolical design to banish him into the forest in order to crown Bharata is known to him is another

occasion where Rama shows filial piety and at the same time makes it known to Kaikeyi that he is no fool and has understood her dark plans. He turns the tables upon Kaikeyi:

Mother, crown Bharata.
 I shall retire to the forest soon.
 Why did my father not tell me that
 and why does he feel sorry about it?
 Bharata is as good at governing the country
 as I am at discarding it.
 It is a strain to rule while
 It is easy to live in the forest.
 My mother is really partial towards me
 In having asked me to
 Take care of my body alone.

Here is a tone of outward respect with an implied sting that no one can miss. This raises Rama in our estimation both as a man and a god.

The Surpanakha episode in Ezhuthachan's *Rāmāyaṇa* is another example. Kampan, in his anxiety to justify her mutilation, paints her as a passionate woman desperately in love with Rama and introduces a rather undignified conversation between the demoness and Rama. Disappointed with Rama's refusal, she rushes into the hermitage to kill Sita when Lakshmana disfigures her. In Tulasidasa, we find Rama only gesticulating to Lakshmana to mutilate her; he does not give an explicit order so that he is not held responsible for the bloody act. But Ezhuthachan deals with the situation in a much more dignified fashion. Rama just keeps the *rakshasi* at bay and as she approaches Sita menacingly and tells her that her conduct is a result of her despair at her unrequited love. Ezhuthachan's description of Surpanakha and her demeanour excites our pity rather than indignation, and, when the situation reaches its climax, the readers are impressed more with its tragic consummation than with any sense of disgust towards the behaviour of a lusty woman. Rama faces the situation as inevitable, but unfortunate. Even Lakshmana's interference is shown as an unfortunate expression of his devotion to his brother. Rama thus emerges from the situation honourably while the readers are left in no doubt about the intensity and genuineness of Surpanakha's passion.

The episode shows the poet's profound sympathy for the weakness of human nature which is also apparent in his treatment of Kaikeyi and Ravana. While most other poets pour out venomous abuse on these characters apparently to glorify their hero, Ezhuthachan exercises admirable restraint and refuses to stereotype them at the same time allowing other characters to air their views freely. When Ravana falls down dead on the battlefield, and Vibhishana, Mandodari and the *rakshasa* women exhibit sorrow, the victor is supposed to exult in his prowess. But Rama here pays respect to Ravana as an ingenuous, courageous, skilful and marvellous fighter. He never wavered and was ready to lay down his life for the cause he fought for. His energy and determination inspired confidence in the fellow-fighters. Any unbiased reader of Ezhuthachan will be struck by the remarkable personality of Ravana who drew from life its choicest gifts and faced the worst risks and dangers with equal cheerfulness born of the spirit of adventure and heroism. In the original *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, Rama appears as a cold-blooded soldier who does not attach any importance to death. He despises the lamentations of Vibhishana and does not even allow him to weep to his heart's content: he asks him to arrange immediately for the cremation of the dead body of the fallen foe. But such behaviour is quite repugnant to Ezhuthachan's sense of public conduct, so he makes Rama pay a glowing tribute to his noble enemy while also consoling Vibhishana saying that Ravana has done his duty by dying like a hero and he has already attained *viraswarga* (the heaven of heroism), purified by his contact with the deity.

Another situation where Ezhuthachan differs from his predecessors is the Bali-Sugreeva controversy. The poet does not take sides here at all. In the episode relating to Mayavi, which led to the misunderstanding between the two brothers, the poet introduces a minor detail that redeems both of them honourably. When Bali entered the cave pursuing the *asura*, he had asked Sugreeva to close the entrance when blood came and keep it open if milk appeared. Blood would come only if Bali died and milk, if Mayavi died. According to Sugreeva's testimony, he had seen blood and so closed the cave. Both were not aware of the *asura*'s magic that had transformed milk into blood. This was the cause of the misunderstanding. This detail is found neither in Valmiki nor the original *Adhyātma*. It clears the character of both the brothers whose

misunderstanding and innocence are thus rendered more tragic. Again, in our text, Rama does not directly accuse Bali of improper behaviour with Sugreeva's wife. He only makes a general appeal to Bali to look into his heart and see whether he has done any such wrong. Probably Ezhuthachan felt that the whole argument was weak and also found variations in different Ramayanas, so he did not want to stress the point.

Ezhuthachan's Ravana is again a noble hero, a great devotee of Siva, a fine musician and a great lover. This is perhaps true to the South Indian tradition followed by Kampan, the Tamil poet as also by the conventions of *kathakali* of Kerala and *yakshagana* of Karnataka where Ravana plays a leading role and is very popular. Ravana's wooing of Sita in our text is an example of his nobility and also of his intense love for Sita. Valmiki makes Ravana blow his own trumpet making him a commonplace lover speaking in an undignified language. But Ezhuthachan's Ravana falls at Sita's lotus-feet, praises her virtues, announces his passion for her and tells her that Rama has no special regard for her as he is *nirguna*, dispassionate and unattached. For him all are the same and she is no different from a savage woman to his eyes that see everything on an equal footing. Ravana then calls her 'the essence of loveliness' and speaks of his manliness and his special regard for her. The whole appeal is subtle and brilliant.

When Hanuman is brought as a captive to Ravana's *darbar* by Indrajit following the destruction of the garden and the killing of many including Aksha, Ravana's son, Ravana does not immediately pronounce any verdict on him; instead, he gives Hanuman a good hearing. While Valmiki uses the opportunity to describe the splendour of Ravana's court, and the author of the original *Adhyāṭma* makes Hanuman pontificate on the greatness of his master, the realisation of self and the necessity of reconciliation, Ezhuthachan converts the *darbar* into a court room. The tribunal first gains the confidence of the accused assuring him of fair hearing, as fair as in Brahma's court. Ravana also thinks of the repercussions and is extremely diplomatic in handling the odd offender. He also tries to get some clue to the enemy's plans. Prahasta interrogates Hanuman in mild tones and asks him who had sent him and tells him he will be released if he tells the truth as the court will strictly follow

the rules of *dharma*. Ravana is shown not to be a monster, but a man of justice. Ezhuthachan treats Ravana almost like a Greek tragic hero, accepting his destiny with dignity and even consciously walking towards his end knowing he would attain *moksha* in Rama's hands. In retrospect, even his abduction of Sita seems a deliberate act to achieve this end.

Ezhuthachan's Sita, like his Rama, combines divinity and humaneness in equal measure. Her human nature comes out where she yearns for Rama and is secretly excited as Rama wins the contest during the *swayamvara* that is subtly communicated through her loving look at Rama before garlanding him. She is also kind and compassionate and does not forget the wives of the monkeys who had fought for Rama. On her way to Ayodhya, he asks Rama to land at Kishkindha so that she can invite those love-lorn women to Ayodhya for the celebrations. There are innumerable instances of this kind in our text that speak volumes about Sita's attention for the details of personal relationships.

Ezhuthachan's Bharata is unrivalled in his self-surrender and devotion to Rama. Agonised by his father's death and his brother's exile, he wastes no time in rushing to the forest with almost the whole court to clear away any misunderstanding Rama might have about his role in the whole conspiracy. We see the climax of Bhakti when he rolls in the dust of the forest that carries the footprints of Rama and pours it over his head in ecstasy. Brotherly love and godly devotion are balanced in his act. Hanuman is another character who shines with unearthly radiance in Ezhuthachan's deft hands. The whole of the beautiful *Sundarakāṇḍam* is dedicated to Hanuman's visit to Lanka.

Ezhuthachan's Ramayana has all the freshness of an independent work of supreme poetry as his inimitable treatment of each episode in language distinguishes him from all he has drawn from. He was a social reformer and great teacher who pioneered a renaissance in Malayalam letters at a time when Kerala, especially Malabar, was suffering from social decadence and aggression from forces inside and outside the country. His *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* is a classic in the true sense as it has centrality and sanity, the two essential qualities of any classic. He combines the universality of a Homer with the high seriousness of a Dante or a Milton. He linked this world with the other world as did

the great Bhakti poets like Tukaram, Namdev, Jnandev, Kabir, Surdas, Meera, Lal Ded, Basava, Tirumular, Vemana and others. He gave the wings of music to poetry and established a poetic idiom that is still current in Malayalam and was followed by his great successors like Kumaran Asan, Vailoppilly Sreedhara Menon, Idassery Govindan Nair and G. Sankara Kurup all of whom also carried forward the philosophical element in him. Though influenced by Ramanuja, he refused to accept the *varnasrama dharma* that the *visishtadvaitins* supported on the basis of the Gita as he was against all man-made hierarchies. He was also a true democrat and declared that his very purpose was to enlighten the uninitiated. Ezhuthachan's *Adhyātmā Rāmāyaṇa*, along with his other famous works like *Sree Mahabharatam*, *Bhagavatam*, *Harinamakeertanam* and *Devee Mahatmyam*, and works attributed to him like *Rāmāyaṇam Irupathinalu Vriatham*, *Sitavijayam*, *Satamukha Rāmāyaṇam*, *Brahmanda Puranam*, *Chintaratnam* and *Kaivalya Navanitam* created a new verbal discourse and elevated him to the status of a true renaissance figure in the civilizational history of Kerala.

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LANGUAGES MEETING LANGUAGES: A DANCE AND DRAMA EXPLORATION OF LADY MACBETH

Reading Shakespeare and performing Shakespeare. Or — to make the remark more general — reading a playtext and performing a playtext. How does this magical transfer from page to stage¹ happen? What does a prospective director look for, in what ways can one *read* a text from a performative point of view? Again, to add another dimension to that question, what performances, expressions and interpretations can any single text provide stimulus for? And finally, who can they evoke a response from?

Through this essay, I will try and examine some of these questions looking at the character of Lady Macbeth as developed and performed in my dance and theatre production, *Crossings*. *Crossings* emerged out of my Sangeet Natak Akademi Junior Fellowship Project. My proposal was to explore ways and means of bringing together the languages of classical dance and text-based drama in a performance mode, to discover pathways of interaction and dialogue between these genres of expression which have more or less been unfamiliar to each other. Till a couple of years before I wrote the proposal for the Fellowship (Which I was awarded in 2003) I have never dreamt that anything by Shakespeare would form the basis of any kind of experimentation that I — as a classical Kathak dancer — would take up. Of course, I had seen Sadanam Balakrishnan's acclaimed production of *Othello in Kathakali* in Delhi and heard of the Kathakali *King Lear*, but these productions were Kathakali versions of the plays — something quite different to what I intended to attempt. I was not looking to translate or adapt a text into another vocabulary of performance; I was looking to bring the vocabularies of text and dance together to initiate a conversation and develop a dialogue.

The first inkling I had that Shakespeare could be an impulse was when I witnessed a 45-minute virtuoso solo performance of a Szechuan

Chinese Opera artist in the role of Lady Macbeth in June 2001². Shakespeare in the Chinese Opera style is by no means a recent or rare innovation. Entire plays have been adapted into this form, preformed in China and shown around the world. What Othello in *Kathakali* is to India, a Kunju Opera *Macbeth* is to China. This brings me to a very distinctive feature that makes the choice of the forms of Kathakali or Chinese Opera interesting for me. These are both forms of drama (theatre, to be more exact), not dance per se. They include dance, movement, music. They are total theatre forms but they are definitely not 'pure' dance as for instance Kathak or Bharatnatyam. Their traditional repertoire comprises classic plays from their respective cultures, they include speech (whether recited by the actors or the accompanists), dialogue and interaction between characters, they are forms which demand a cast of players — not solo like many of our classical dances. Therefore, to transpose a Shakespearean text into such a format of presentation requires a whole different set of thought and creative processes than what we have attempted to do in *Crossings*.

Interestingly, perhaps, the actual choice of Lady Macbeth for a solo performance did not surprise me. She is arguably the most complex female character in the Shakespearean galaxy (of which only a small percentage are women of any great import). She has undeniably joined the ranks of archetypes and iconography all over the world — and not only in the field of performance. She has become a metaphor, a description, a manner of being, a figure of reference. In this she is not so different from the many icons and archetypes we, in India, encounter and refer to in our everyday lives — Draupadi, Kali, Durga, Krishna, Sita, Rama... The list is endless. Hinduism doesn't have a pantheon of 3 million gods for nothing!

Of course, it is only in hindsight that I can speak about parallels between Shakespeare and Indian classical dance — parallels in attitudes, assumptions, approaches and abilities. During and soon after witnessing the Chinese Opera performance, I only had a strong gut feeling that this was a character that opened up a whole panorama of possibilities and interpretations through the medium of Indian classical dance. I could not understand a word of the performance naturally since it was all in Chinese. But the intent, the power, the towering tragedy of the one character (supplemented only occasionally by a silent figure representing

Macbeth) had me overwhelmed. I gained an insight into the mind of the Lady like none of the intensely theoretical character analyses during school had ever given me. Here she was conjured up before me in the flesh through the tremendous presence and virtuosity of the Chinese actress, the manner in which she conveyed the essence of the character she was portraying through one simple movement — an arm flung out from the body so that the water sleeves of her flowing costume cascaded out towards the audience with the power and passion that Lady Macbeth embodies. An actress trained in an 'ancient' traditional form of performance that is irreconcilably culture specific at a certain level; responding with that language to a wholly different genre of performance text; and yet communicating everything necessary to an audience from a third background altogether. The combination was electric!

Recently I was leading a presentation on *Crossings* for a group of undergraduate students for the Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University. I decided to lay the ground by sussing out attitudes of the young group towards Indian classical dance and — separately — Shakespeare. The visual impulse was a montage of Indian classical dance images: everything from Kathak to Bharatnatyam, Manipuri to Mohiniattam. Intense close-ups, blurred motion, statuesque poses, choreographic moments... They were all there in the full regalia of how 'traditional' classical dance is performed. The initial responses were safe — colour, vibrance, strong expressions, detailed costumes and jewellery, music, rhythm, movement, lyricism, grace... Probe a little further and out came the attitudes which I have come to expect. Bewilderment, incomprehension, boredom, distance, too coded, irrelevant to contemporary life, caught in repetitive themes and manners of presentation... all the attitudes of 'modern' Indian youth were out in full force!

Of the 20-odd people in the room, only about five admitted to having any association with dance. Of them only two were — or had been — students of dance and one was their lecturer who had been married to a dancer. Of the students who watched dance, none were male. But let us not get sidetracked into a debate of what percentage of which gender watches what kind of dance. I must say quite frankly, though, that I have seen much worse. Five out of twenty-five is not bad at all!

Could these same reactions be applied to Shakespeare, I asked? Of course the answer was a resounding yes. I pushed a little further: had any of the students ever been made to watch classical dance as an expression of India's 'ancient' heritage and culture? Again, yes. Could one question its validity? No. Why? Because it is part of our ancient traditions therefore it is unquestionable! And Shakespeare? Could they, as students, question his writing, his acknowledged brilliance? Could they dare to say that his plays were wholly dispensable and not be forever labelled a heretic and fool to boot? No. So there we were: two traditions surrounded by an impenetrable halo of sacrosanct-ness each placed on a pedestal to be reverently worshipped from afar, never to come down among us mortals to be joyously received, whole-heartedly appreciated and sincerely celebrated. In fact, one could perhaps say that an assumption of atrophy and inaccessibility has been imposed on them because of the very nature in which they are taught or otherwise communicated.

Apart from these parallels in perceptions, there are others too. Poetry, lyricism, allegory, metaphor, repetition, imagery, rhythm, representation, symbolism are all part and parcel of how Shakespeare writes and how classical dance is performed. There is no one in India — a dance spectator or not — who will be unable to recognise the stance of Krishna with a flute at his lips, or Shiva with a flaming trinetra, or Kali holding a severed head in her hand. These are icons which are built into our cultural upbringing. In Shakespeare, the icons are perhaps not so easily identifiable. They are more generalised, not mythical or religious and often occur in contrast. Lady Macduff as the caring mother³, juxtaposed against Lady Macbeth who would dash out the brains of the baby suckling at her breast⁴; the regal and gentle king Duncan juxtaposed against the tyrannical and violent Macbeth... And then of course the strong icons of the supernatural, the three witches themselves.

The witches also belong to the realm of symbolism. They stand for unnaturalness and, even though they appear only four times in the actual play itself, their prophecies direct the entire course of events. They are a presence throughout. In classical dance, too, symbolism is omnipresent at every level. Each gesture has a symbolic and a representational aspect. The dancer is constantly referring to other

things in describing a scene or a character. Metaphor is everywhere. Imagery is everywhere. So also in Shakespeare. Macbeth in particular is permeated with the idea of robes, of clothing: sometimes purely descriptively, sometimes as a comment on the mental state of a character, and sometimes as a metaphor for disguising true intent. This last idea does not stop at apparel alone. The face, the external register of all our emotions and intentions is repeatedly referred to as a mask, a disguise. Imagery in Indian classical dance relies perhaps more on visual and descriptive metaphors rather than textual ones: after all it is a language of gesture. But both genres are stylistically given to responding to ideas with strong and sensual images whether created through a well-tuned phrase or a well-tuned movement.

These visions, these images, the associations that flood the mind of any director or choreographer are nascent responses to a text, to an impulse. As a dancer, my responses to text (or anything else) are always of a more visual nature. There are always pictures in my mind whether I am reading a poem or a novel or a play. And this is regardless of whether I intend to produce a performance out of it or not. For a director trained in drama rather than dance, the initial responses may be more through the realm of ideas and tangential thought. For me, I often have to discover why a certain image is evoked by a particular piece of text: the relationship is not always lucid. For example, when I began working on *Crossings* in 2003, I started to collect images of Lady Macbeth from the internet. These ranged from classical Shakespeare renditions (from an era pre-dating photographs) to images of Ellen Terry in the role to a rather bizarre version produced somewhere in Europe which presented a series of provocative photographs showing the Lady literally steeped in blood and gore. But just these images did not satisfy my reading of Lady Macbeth. After all, we were not producing the play, *Macbeth*. We were undertaking a journey into the mind of one specific character in the play — the conflicts, the struggles, the resolutions, the victories, the defeats, the hopes, the disappointments... as experienced by her in the course of the play. In a way we were inverting what usually happens in dramatic text where the plot is driven forward by interactions and tensions between various characters and situations; here, all that would happen within one character seen as if through a prism — split into four facts. This is noteworthy. In Indian classical dance we are used

to one dancer depicting many roles in the course of a performance. Here was another inversion: four performers were to depict various aspects of one role.

• Considering this, the first challenge I faced was to flesh out in great detail the maximum possible ingredients in the character of Lady Macbeth. The images I had — classical or otherwise — showed her either as a regal, powerful / power-hungry character or as broken and lost during the astonishing sleepwalking scene. If one is to read through *Macbeth*, it is quite true that these are the two predominant ways in which the audience or reader encounters her. This is not to say that any actress worth her salt would portray merely these extremes, but they would of course be the quintessential images of Lady Macbeth. After all, they are playing one of many characters who together drive the action of the play. In *Crossings*, since we were focussing on only the one character, we had to concentrate a great deal on filling in the gaps; *i.e.*, what condition is Lady Macbeth in when she does not appear on stage in the original play. Also, for actors and drama directors the rich text probably provides more than enough material for creating a fully rounded character. But as a dancer and working with dancers what I needed were images. Not only do I personally find it much more natural to create and respond with and from visual impulses, experience has taught me that dancers in general (and possibly Indian dancers in particular) work much better with visual stimuli. Working on this and other productions I may only have had to mention an iconic figure from mythology such as Draupadi or refer to a particular type of nayika, and dancers were able to craft nuanced details and uncover totally unexpected layers in a character or situation within an amazingly short span of time. This, where hours of discussion and intellectual analysis into text and sub-text prove to be not much more than pure Greek to them! With actors it is possibly very much the opposite.

So in addition to the images from the internet and the interpretations of the character of Lady Macbeth in some of the best known film-versions of the play (Roman Polanski's film with an ultra-feminine blond and blue-eyed waif-like Lady Macbeth, Akira Kurosawa's immovable, cold and bloodcurdling Lady Asaji in *Throne of Blood*, along with more 'traditional' portrayals in the BBC film and Orson Welles' production), I began collecting, often at random, visuals of

famous (often notorious) female characters from films both Indian and foreign. Ann Baxter and Bette Davis in *All About Eve*, Bette Midler in *For the Boys*, Cate Blanchett in *Elizabeth*, Shabana Azmi in *Godmother*, Bette Davis again in and as *Jezebel*, Karuna Banerjee in *Pather Panchali*, Katherine Hepburn in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Nadira in *Shree 420*, Rekha in *Umrao Jaan*, Tabu in *Mughbool...* at a point the variety began to worry me deeply! Only later, while the definite characters of the four aspects in my production were gradually crystallising, did I realise that there was, after all, a method to my madness. Each image in its own insidious way ultimately contributed part of a jigsaw which was painstakingly pieced together by the performers to create a complete character — and this process developed and evolved on and off over a period of one and a half years which saw three versions of the production, with three different sets and three different scripts and three different performers in the role essayed by the actress.

There is the power-hungry, dangerous and falsely seductive, conniving facet — almost a Manthara — who will do anything to be queen. There is her gentle antithesis — the moral conscience, the mother figure, the one who stands for all that is life-giving, nurturing and truthful. There is the idealist and romantic — innocently by the “king-becoming graces” she is said to have — who truly believes that her husband and she can make a positive difference to Scotland as the leaders of the nation. And there is the loving wife and equal partner — full of pride and faith in her husband's abilities — who holds on to Macbeth's letter as proof of their bond till the very end. Each complete characters on their own with individual traits, pressures and foibles, each a part of the others, each with definite ideas of right and wrong, forgivable and unforgivable, actions and consequences. Each with a separate but overlapping relationship with Macbeth, and very specific relationships with each other. Who can talk to whom, who will listen to whom, who can influence, who can command whom... These fluid shifts of hierarchy form the basis of *Crossings* as the Lady embarks on her doomed journey.

The cast of *Crossings* includes three dancers from backgrounds of Kathak, Bharatnatyam and Manipuri. People frequently ask me what made me choose the forms I did. In the case of *Crossings*, I most definitely did not. I chose performers whom I wanted to work with, who I felt would

be interested in being part of such a project, who would be able to intelligently contribute towards crafting the process and the production. The particular forms, therefore, became the individual languages of expression and response that each performer arrived with — languages replete with their own unique approaches, strengths, perceptions and definitions. All this would feed into this very collaborative piece which has come to be (even though I say so myself) a remarkable amalgam of performance genres. In fact, with all due respect to the other actresses we worked with, it took us more than a year (not till May 2005, in fact) before we found an actress who fit into the same mould and mindset of the dancers' cast — Anubha Fatehpuria. The choice of music composer, though, was instinctive and fixed in my mind long before this project got off the ground. Nageen Tanvir, with a classically trained voice that is imbued with a raw and earthy primitivism and her astonishing range of experience in folk and tribal music of central India, seemed tailor-made for the role. The music she has created for the productions has always been one of its most unique and haunting features, spanning as it does this range of music genres that evoke such subtle shades of mood. Add to this a sensible and sensitive percussionist equally at ease accompanying vocalists and dancers — Siddhartha Bhattacharyya — and our cast was complete.

I began rehearsals for what was to be the first workshop production version of *Crossings* in January 2005. The process of work was largely based on improvisatory responses to portions of the text or specific ideas and images. There was no script; I wrote scenes in tandem with what we were creating in rehearsals. As I have mentioned before, the script has seen three versions — April 2004, March 2005 and June 2005. The last one is still constantly tweaked and modified each time it is rehearsed and performed, the most recent performance being in Delhi in February 2006. The dialogue is taken from *Macbeth* but not restricted to the lines spoken by Lady Macbeth. The original play has been, in a sense, deconstructed and the *Crossings* text is built from its fragments to tell the story of our Lady Macbeth — herself fragmented. The play opens at the moment she receives Macbeth's letter informing her about his encounter with the witches. It then travels into her mind witnessing the struggle between her various selves as they respond to and deal with the idea of murdering Duncan. Her conscience quelled for the time

being, she prepares to greet her guest at the castle gates and invite him in to his death. Even as the murder is being committed, her conscience makes itself heard again. The murder committed, each self reacts differently — defeated, triumphant, horrified, evasive. The infamous banquet scene with its power to make or break a reputation follows, watching the gradual crumbling of every self into despair and guilt. Even as she tries to deal with her broken hopes and dreams, she drifts into a half-real half-fantasy world reliving the horrors she has seen and, indeed inflict. Her world lies in a shambles around her bathed in invisible blood. As she sinks into death, Macbeth's letter which seemed to promise so much returns to haunt her.

The above description cannot do justice to the production. Nor will I be able to put down in detail the many and varied processes of trial and error that we went through before we arrived at each section, scene or even specific moment in the performance. The work was often agonizingly slow but sometimes inspiration fired our collective imaginations and we proceeded at a brisk pace. To give a taste of some of the methods and pathways of interpretation that we moved along, I will now describe below our approaches to one very specific speech in *Macbeth*. The speech which the world over resounds with its power and imagery, and the treatment of which determines how any version of Lady Macbeth is played and received.

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd' ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry 'Hold, hold!'

The Lady has just heard that the king, Duncan, is expected as their guest that night. She knows that there will never be a better opportunity to commit his murder and makes a decision to plan it. In order to make this terrible decision, she must quell her conscience, all her maternal and womanly feelings, to ensure that her strength does not quail when she will most require it. She must “unsex” herself and leave behind all that is gentle, all that is nurturing, all that is human. Only when she has managed to go through with this (in a sense) violation of herself, can she even attempt to justify to her husband the act of killing Duncan.

This is the context of the speech in the original play. The passage provides a turning point, a pivot for the future course of events. It is also a pivot which precipitates the tumultuous inner conflict of Lady Macbeth. In *Crossings*, the speech provides the impulse for much of the first section of the performance — right from the moment when the Lady hears of Duncan’s impending visit till she greets him at the castle gates. During the interim the power-hungry aspect of Lady Macbeth who conceives the actual idea of killing Duncan must find separate ways and means to win over as many of the other aspects as she can. After all, majority wins. Only when she has weight on her side and has successfully isolated the conscience figure can the plans for the actual killing itself be fine-tuned and implemented. There are a variety of ways in which she attempts to do this: cornering other aspects individually, pitting one against the other or trying to rouse them to action as a group. Strategies succeed, strategies fail, but underneath it all is this one speech. Before going any further, I must apologise for the inadequacy of the written or spoken word when it comes to describing any visual performative rendition. Points will be missed, reactions will be generalised, nuances will be overlooked. However, I will try and streamline my discussion to focus on three key responses to the text. These will tie in to what I have already said about translating text into dance and iconographic relationships in particular.

What is Lady Macbeth actually doing in this speech? It is obviously a call, a chant. In nature and feel it is almost ritualistic, imbued with a ‘religious’ fervour that both thrills and chills to the core. It is an invocation both desperate and commanding, both terrible and sublime.

What is an invocation in dance? What are the gestures and patterns of movement that are used? How much is representational and / or descriptive? What are the predominant moods we try to create? Are there any specific structures we follow in the development of an invocation? Where else, in dance, do these movements re-appear, where not?

What is auspicious, what is not? How can symbols of auspiciousness be converted to inauspicious ones? What is in/auspicious for who in the group?

How does one invoke / invite the spirits / Duncan? Ways of expressing the word "Come [you spirits]" in dance — as guests, plead, invite, gracious, as a hostess, to a child, to a lover, seductive, prayerful, commanding, with pleasure, expectant, fearful, a virgin bride...?

The idea of an invocation was one of the first responses to the speech. When the dancers were asked to translate the speech 'literally' into the language of their respective dance forms, we found that the ritualistic element so apparent in the words easily made the transition into the movement text of the three dances. It only required a few additions and modifications such as including gestures of preparing for a ritual like offering flowers or lighting a sacrificial fire to complete the picture. *Macbeth* is anyhow replete with references to ritual and superstition. This particular response saw many changes and placements through the three versions. I will only describe some of the ways it exists in the production as it stands today.

The speech or sections from the speech recur throughout *Crossings*, much like recurring images in *Macbeth* which signify different things at different times. The entire speech is recited just once and this is where the three dancers and actress perform a very minimalised version of the entire choreographic response to the speech that I have referred to in the earlier paragraph. There are several reasons why we felt it necessary to minimalise it. First, the speech itself is so powerful that it deserves to be heard in all its purity and import. Second, to perform the invocation in dance without any verbal reference to the speech would prove futile; one must lead the audience into a sequence providing some indications which one can later elaborate on. The minimal movements that the audience sees at this first recitation of the speech thus become a leitmotif for further development through the course of the play. Since the reference to the speech has been established, the

audience have a route into a piece of choreography which they are then free to interpret in a variety of ways, rather than just receive it passively as a dancer's highly coded response to some aspect of Lady Macbeth. This disregard of providing the audience a 'clue' to nudge them along is something that unfortunately dogs much of contemporary⁸ work in dance today.

Thirdly — and very importantly — to perform the entire speech in translation, as it were, depicts only a well-designed piece of choreography performed by very competent dancers. What it does not evoke is the mental state of Lady Macbeth at the very moment; indeed, as far as *Crossings* goes, we are talking of mental states in the plural. Each aspect must have a very specific entry point into and response to the speech. Even if all four recite it, each one must have a very particular manner of saying it, a particular intent. And this specificity of intent must inform how the dance is performed. That is where drama meets dance. So in this first recitation, the text took precedence, seemingly. But each performer created an embryonic version, so to speak, of that initial choreographic response. These movements cannot be called dance, but something that could (and later does) move into dance. Tentative explorations, a testing of the ground, a dialogue with oneself where one works through one's own confusions and doubts. Indeed, as the performers echo each other through the speech, the conscience figure takes a decision and stops the invocation going further in no uncertain terms. She brings the other aspects back to earth with a rude jolt that knocks all stylisation and beginnings of dance out of them. As the first invocation fails, but it demonstrates its raw power in that it has the ability to tempt even the conscience who begins to take part and then snaps herself back to balance. The two poles between which conflict will now take place have therefore been set up.

The second instance I describe concentrates very much on the setting up of a ritual space — the 'altar'. This space has already been briefly occupied early in the play with the paraphernalia of traditional and auspicious greeting. This has been done in response to the announcement of Duncan's visit, before the power-hungry aspect makes itself known. The space has therefore already been designated as a repository of all things propitious. In fact, it is from here that Lady Macbeth takes the *thali* of chandan and kumkum to greet Macbeth when

he comes home. The fact that, by this time, the altar has also been established as a sort of sacrificial block to the “spirits” besmears the auspicious materials on the *thali* with tinges of danger. By the time of this total setting up of the space for the second invocation, the ingredients on the *thali* lost much of their wholesome associations, taking on far murkier hues instead.

One aspect has been won over; the forces now stand equally balanced, two versus two. The second invocation serves to initiate the conversion of a third aspect. The setting up of the ritual space is juxtaposed with final preparations being made to greet Duncan and the remaining ‘innocent’ aspects of Lady Macbeth having a conversation about Macbeth’s achievements. With happy upbeat music as background, the ritual space — complete with incense sticks, kumkum, rice powder, flowers, and a clay *dhunuchi* with camphor to burn — is extended and ‘purified’. The chant too goes one step higher; a decision is made to communicate the plan further, as the following text will show.

A: Hie thee hither...

B: Come, you spirits...

A: That I may pour my spirits in your ear...

B: That tend on mortal thoughts...

A: And chastise with the valour of my tongue all that impedes thee...

B: Unsex me here!”

Finally, I come to the most compelling of the invocatory responses to the speech — one which, ironically, is performed with no text at all. This is the elaboration of the choreographic translation that I have already referred to. Since the connection has already been made with this speech, the intent, the mood, the direction is established for the audience. The third aspect at this point has been mesmerised by the burning camphor, but she is still beset with doubt. Half-tempted, half-hypnotised she follows the lead of the first aspect as she begins the silent invocation at the altar. After a while the trance-like movements take her over completely. The first aspect recedes to watch while the third centre-stage. The entire sequence is performed — from creating a ritual space through a sacrificial fire to the rendition of the actual speech itself. The only aural accompaniment is a drone of the Tanpura and a regular beat of the cymbals — a soundscape very likely to induce trance and meditation by itself. This section is not short and it is quite slow and

suspended, but such is its power because of the dance itself and also because the audience are acutely aware of what has gone before, that it is able to create a hushed atmosphere bordering on serenity and suspense.

Soon after this section comes what we refer to as the Putana sequence. Now, what has an Indian *rakshasi* character rooted in the Krishna legend got to do with Lady Macbeth or anything remotely Scottish. On the face of it, nothing at all. The idea of Putana as a reference had emerged while reading an essay on *Macbeth* by Janet Adelman — ‘Born of Woman: Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*’¹⁰. This was during my background research a good few months before we actually began rehearsals. Adelman points out that *Macbeth* is a journey from ‘unholy’ disorder (personified by the three witches in the opening scene) to ‘holy’ order (restored by the efforts of the loyal Macduff and the rightful heir to the Scottish throne, Malcolm). The author posits that this transition is achieved through the re-imposition of a patriarchal system which completely excludes any presence of influence of women. At the end of the play there are not witches, no Hecate, no Lady Macbeth — not even a gentle Lady Macduff! Women power and influence is seen as contributing to the forces of disorder, especially women power that is non-maternal (and therefore unfeminine) in nature. An excerpt from my notes on reading this essay —

What had Putana sworn to? What were her feelings as she approached Krishna, the baby? Resolute (like Lady Macbeth approaching Duncan)? The transformation from unfeeling demoness to a woman with maternal feelings came only at the sight of Krishna (similar to Lady Macbeth when she feels Duncan looks like her father?), she becomes a mother, a nurturer. But she has ‘sworn’ to destroy Krishna. She must nurture him in order to destroy him. Her milk *is* gall. She cannot ‘unsex’ herself; her femininity, the grace that she adorns herself with are vital for her “fell purpose”. Here, the “compunctious visitings of [human/feminine] nature” are essential to convert her from a repulsive creature to a maternal nurse: she is woman. In that transformation, she finds herself. But foresworn as she is to Kansa, that transformation also necessarily destroys her. Maybe it is not Krishna’s act of sucking the life out of her, it is her inability to take his life through the very process that nurtures it that kills her. Her only option is to draw the gall from her breasts into her own body, slowly poisoning herself rather

than poisoning him. Like Lady Macbeth, she implodes: the effort to kill, kills her.

Unfortunately, I cannot recall exactly what train of thought triggered off these particular notes. One rarely does. There are always too many threads contributing to the emergence of a single image or association. Specific phrases from the 'Unsex me here' speech, though, did conjure up Putana for me. The act of unsexing itself, 'Come to my woman's breasts and take my milk for gall', 'no compunctious visitings of nature shake my fell purpose'...all these violent images of forcibly quelling natural instincts of any sort reminded me of Putana. In addition, *Macbeth* constantly makes metaphorical and literal references to the 'real' face as opposed to the 'false' face, true intent as opposed to presented facade. The contradiction in Putana is that her presented facade becomes her true intent at the sight of Krishna. At some level with Lady Macbeth the same is true. She presents herself to Duncan as a perfect and "honoured"¹² hostess, and there is always a part of her that cannot plot against her guest, that retains the greatest degree of respect and affection for the fatherly king. 'Had he not resembled/My father as he slept', she says 'I had done't.'¹³ A grim regret to have, no doubt, but the voice of conscience all the same.

For those not familiar with the Putana episode, a brief elaboration is necessary. It had been prophesied that Krishna would grow up to kill his uncle, King Kansa. Kansa thus employed various forces and means to do away with Krishna while he is still a child, a babe in arms even. One of the first is the *rakshasi*, Putana. She was commanded to go to the village where much was being made of the newborn Krishna. She set out in the guise of a young woman who had heard of this beautiful child and come to see him. Her breasts were smeared with poison and her plan was to ask affectionately to suckle the child, and thus kill him with the "gall" that flowed from her breasts instead of milk. Krishna proved a match for her, though, and fastened his lips onto her nipples with such tenacity that the life was sucked out of her instead. In the throes of death, she lost her disguise and regained her "fiend-like"¹⁴ *rakshasi* appearance much to the consternation and shock of all around. Krishna, thus, immediately became anointed with divinity.

A large spectrum of mythological characters is portrayed in Indian classical dance. Putana, though, ~~does~~ not spring to mind as a prominent

character to be essayed in her own right. She exists solely to demonstrate the prowess and invincibility of Krishna even as a baby. However, in the Sanskrit theatre form of Koodiyattam her rendition is very different. I first saw this particular interpretation enacted by the brilliant performer, Usha Nangiar, in Delhi, February 1995. If the 45-minute solo by the Chinese Opera artiste brought Lady Macbeth alive for me, Usha Nangiar — with her total command of a form replete with subtleties and intricate details of improvisation — did the same for Putana. Putana was Kansa's slave. She had to obey his orders and she set out on the mission to kill Krishna as a matter of course. But at the sight of this beautiful child, all her maternal instincts come to the fore. She is transformed into the guise she has adopted — that of a loving, caring nurturer. The dilemma she faces is cruelly ironical. She cannot return with the mission unaccomplished: Kansa will kill her. She cannot bear the thought that she must kill Krishna, but she has no choice. She tries to carry out the deed full of compassion and pity for the baby she is about to murder. In the end, Krishna proves to be her salvation as she dies by his hand!

Putana so rendered is a much more complete and complex character than merely an emotionless, mercenary *rakshasi* who is rightfully dispatched by a god. There is so much conflict, so much drama, so many nuances to the mental state of person in such a situation. Lady Macbeth exhorts the spirits to unsex her, to de-feminise her from the inside, to fill her with nothing but cruelty and replace the qualities of nurturer embodied in milk with the qualities of destroyer embodied in gall. Putana could have uttered the self-same words.

Putana performs the invocation as a routine, but genuinely — something she does before setting out on any mission. The plan forms. At the sight of Krishna, she turns into a mother/woman involuntarily. Now the invocation becomes desperate. She needs to be filled with cruelty, but is unable to receive it completely. She cannot be 'unsexed', now that she has seen Krishna (Had he not resembled my father...)¹⁵ The *rakshasi* self tries to emerge, but fails. She becomes both womanised and humanised. Her attempt to 'stop up the passages' kills her.¹⁶

Lady Macbeth is a mother. She refers to her motherhood herself:

I have given suck and I know
How tender it is to love the babe

The '*rakshasi*' self responds with the lines that immediately follow this in the original play itself:

I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out.¹⁷

This tug-of-war between the mother figure bent on caring for and saving life as personified in a helpless baby, and the '*rakshasi*' figure equally bent on proving she has been totally "unsexed" by killing the child sets up two poles between which a third aspect is torn. Which option will this Lady Macbeth choose?

Now one needed to translate this sense of confusion, fear and pressure into a dance sequence where the tussle between Lady Macbeth as she was (gentle, hospitable, noble) and Lady Macbeth as she re-visioned herself (cold, calculating, ruthless) was made clear. This sequence brought to the fore the strength of Bharatnatyam abhinaya combined with a percussive score. The turmoil of emotions that were expressed through the performer's bhava — torn as she was between natural and forced emotions — was reflected in the constant shift between the more melodic beats from the Tabla and the more powerful and resonating strokes from the Pakhawaj. The dancer undergoing this conflict is placed squarely between the power-hungry figure and the mother figure. She begins in a '*rakshasi*' aspect and then, at the sight of the child she is to kill, she is transformed into a doting mother. This remarkable change is accompanied by a shift in the music from Pakhawaj to Tabla. The confusions and doubts grow, the shifts become more precarious until her utter bewilderment blurs — even in terms of dance — who she actually is.

There is one other iconographic figure that came to mind both on reading this particular speech and Adelman's essay. The figure — of Sakti. Initially, we had thought of Kali. But the goddess Kali is regarded as an awe-inspiring — but predominantly destructive — force who, though she comes to destroy evil, is ultimately overtaken by a bloodlust that causes her to slaughter at random. The latter portion of her nature is perhaps more compatible with Macbeth rather than his wife. Sakti, as a concept, is far more nebulous and all-inclusive: indeed Kali too falls within her realm. She is the epitome of feminine energy, a

force that can as easily create as she can destroy. There is, therefore, a greater element of danger in Sakti than in Kali. The latter is more predictable, the former not so. Also, Sakti is an intangible, untenable force. On the other hand, the Kali myth as it is told today 'domesticates' her somewhat with her husband managing to put an end to her killing spree by lying in her path. Once Sakti is activated, nothing but her own decision can stop her. The connection that can be made between Sakti and Lady Macbeth's speech, I believe, need no elaboration. She is drawing Sakti into herself, absorbing her power and her strength to enable her to commit murder. Unfortunately, she forgets that Sakti's reach is vast — she also embraces the constructive and gentle energy of a mother, a daughter, a carer.

The Sakti sequence enters an area which the original play does not directly touch upon — the mental preparation that Lady Macbeth must have made before greeting Duncan at the castle gates. But along with this mental preparation is a physical preparation. She must *look* the perfect and gracious hostess. The concept of *sola-shringar* is a favourite theme with all Indian classical dancers. The image of a woman decking herself up for her beloved, the sensuousness of applying fragrant chandan, oiling and tying her hair, choosing and adorning herself with attractive jewellery create an intense aura of the erotic that poets, lyricists and, of course, dancers have revelled in. *Sringar* is therefore an act of union, an act of fulfillment, an act where all our positive energies shine through, an act which reiterates our humanity. It is an act of life. The question in *Crossings* was, how could we make this an act of death?

To answer this, let me first examine how we came up with the idea of using *sringar* to tell the story of Lady Macbeth. *Macbeth*, the play, is peppered with references to disguising one's true intentions. 'Make our faces vizards to our hearts'¹⁸, 'Look like the innocent flower/But be the serpent under it'¹⁹, 'False face must hide what the false heart doth know'²⁰ ...such pieces of advice are constantly exchanged between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The notion of changing one's appearance, of presenting a false face, of hiding one's true self behind a facade threw up the idea of mirror images — one true, one false. Which is which? This led us to explore that act of *sringar* in a slightly devious way — as a mode of disguise, of making oneself up to present an appearance

which — though carefully crafted in order to create a desired effect — is essentially false.

The whole idea of decking up, for what, for who? Is it a disguise? Whose choice is the disguise? What is being disguised?²¹

Lady Macbeth takes on numerous guises / roles during the course of events. She presents herself as the gracious and humble hostess to Duncan, receiving him dutifully as an honoured guest into her house while simultaneously plotting his murder. During the banquet to celebrate Macbeth's coronation, she plays the role of the perfect queen with just the right dose of condescension. And all the time at the back of her mind are the gory images of Duncan's dead body. The act of Sringar in any of these circumstances must well be anything but beautiful. The act of dressing up must become grotesque.

The grotesque as a form of expression has been used to various degrees of success in performance. Examples of Clown work, some instances of German Expressionist Dance or Butoh, or the unforgettable Joel Grey character in the film version of *Cabaret*. But in Indian classical dance?! Many would say this is not possible. The underlying notion is that all classical dance must be beautiful. I beg to differ. The underlying rule is that all dance must be beautifully performed. There is a great difference between prettiness and beauty. Dance — and indeed all performance — deals with the latter, not the former.

The Sringar sequence is performed by two dancers mirroring each other's movements. They are watched helplessly by the figure of conscience that has been wholly isolated by this point. The lilting melodies of Raga Kanara form the background score to this sequence, its essential purity and romanticism providing a stark contrast to the way and circumstances in which shringar is being performed. The conscience tries repeatedly to stop the other two, but they are unrelenting, almost in a trance with their own preparations — preparations that are not aimed at becoming beautiful, but at 'unsexing' themselves once and for all.

After they have decked themselves up, they admire their own hundiwork in a mirror, moving into a sequence which contrasts the

gracefully subtle movements of the limbs in Kathak with the powerful and definite movements of Bharatnatyam, so that one could be watching both a nayika revelling in the success of her Sringar/disguise or a murderess flexing her muscles, readying herself for the bloody act. The hapless figure of the 'moral' Lady Macbeth trapped by her other more 'unsexed' selves, laments the success of the invocation to the spirits, which seems to have so completely turned Lady Macbeth into an inhuman creature:

Now, over the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams
Abuse the curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates²²

A hugely disconcerting celebration does follow. The Sakti sequence is performed to fiery sargams in Raga Hindol with a strong pakhawaj accompaniment. The choreography juxtaposes forceful and determined Bharatnatyam and Odissi movements against the precision and vigour of Kathak footwork. The actress arrives as the hostess figure of Lady Macbeth fully prepared to greet her victim at the gates. As she puts finishing touches to her adornments, the conscience — aghast, but powerless — tears them off in desperation as they appear on her own body. The accusing spots have, for her, already begun to arrive. The combination, as it rises to a climax, creates a sense of unshakable determination and alarming inevitability.

I must clarify a certain point here before I close. This performance piece as it stands today has not been designed either for a dance audience or for a drama audience. It is impossible — and unnecessary — for individual members of a mixed audience to identify every single connection we have made, every parallel we have drawn, every association we have developed. It is even unnecessary for them to recognise the appearance of Putana or Sakti. These reference points are for the creators of the piece. What must get across to the audience is the essential feel of these characters and devices. The dilemma Putana faces is more important than the connection that is made between a character in Indian mythology and Lady Macbeth. The unnerving power of this woman as she prepares herself to murder is more important than the fact that the source of that power lies in the Indian concept of Sakti. For all practical purposes, the audience is participating in a journey into the

mind of Lady Macbeth. For them the only character that should exist is Lady Macbeth in all her magnificent complexity, and each scene, each image should serve to take the journey forward.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. Taken from a phrase used by Mahesh Dattani in an interview. *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, Issue 24, Anjum Katyal ed. (Naveen Kishore for Seagull Foundation for the Arts, Calcutta, December, 1999).
2. This was part of a trip organised for the MA Theatre and the World students at the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth.
3. *Macbeth*, Act IV, scene ii.
4. *Macbeth*, Act, scene vii, Lines 54-58.
5. *Macbeth*, Act IV, scene iii, Line 91. Spoken by Macduff to Malcolm when he describes himself, albeit falsely, as completely unfit to be king, i.e. lacking in all 'king-becoming graces'.
6. *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene v, Lines 31-53.
7. Rehearsal notes, 7/8/9 January 2004.
8. I use the word 'contemporary' to denote the times we live in, not any particular form of dance.
9. A juxtaposition of two speeches by Lady Macbeth, both from Act I, scene v. The phrases spoken by A are her call to Macbeth on whom she wishes to impress the rationale and necessity of murdering Duncan (Lines 24-27). The phrases spoken by B are the opening lines of the "unsex me here" speech (Lines 39-40).
10. Adelman, Janet, "Born of Woman: Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*", *William Shakespeare: Canon and Critique — An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, Leela Gandhi, ed. (Pencraft International, Delhi, 1998).
11. Rehearsal notes, 11 January 2004.
12. *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene vi, Line 10. Duncan refers to Lady Macbeth 'our honoured hostess' when she greets him at the castle gates.
13. *Macbeth*, Act II, scene ii, Lines 12-13.
14. This dead butcher and his fiend-like queen,
Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands
Took off her life.
15. See Note 13.
16. Notes, 31 October 2003.
17. *Macbeth*, Act I, scene vii, Lines 54-58.

18. *Macbeth*, Act III, scene ii, Line 34. Spoken by Macbeth to Lady Macbeth in their only private scene after the murder. Immediately after is the crucial and very public banquet scene where appearances count for everything.
19. *Macbeth*, Act I, scene v, Lines 64-65. Spoken by Lady Macbeth to Macbeth as she goads him on to murder Duncan who is to be their guest that night.
20. *Macbeth*, Act I, scene vii, Line 82. The grim closing line of the Act I spoken by Macbeth as he decides to go through with the plan of killing Duncan.
21. Rehearsal notes. 12 January 2004.
22. *Macbeth*, Act II, scene I, Lines 49-51. Spoken by Macbeth as a soliloquy as he prepares himself to commit the murder.

ORALITY AND BEYOND

Introduction

The theme of this seminar relates itself principally to two spaces, among some others, of creativity and enquiry. One space is textuality as understood in literary parlance. Though recent years have witnessed multiple approaches, specially derived from the dissemination of structuralist theories, and cultural studies have treated a variety of non-linguistic cultural forms such as photography, cinema, music, dance, architecture, fashion, and many others, as texts, textuality in literary studies is ordinarily limited to the 'scriptable' and more precisely, 'the work' in print. Any standard dictionary will offer a typical definition of text as 'the wording of anything written or printed; the structure formed of the words in their order; the very words, phrases and sentences as written' (*The Oxford Universal Dictionary*). In this perspective, textuality as the derivative of text, without its many modernist interpretations, and orality, are two contradictory concepts. The relationship between the two are conventionally approached from the treatment of two distinct categories of literary expressions of two phases of social progress. In this approach orality is the marker for 'the verbal art' of the pre-or non-literate phases of social history, 'literature', on the other hand, is the scripted and printed creative expressions of literate society. Conventionally again, the first is 'folklore' and the second is 'literature'. 'The verbal art' is viewed as the creative expressions of the backward sections of a community or of the backward communities of a country whereas 'literature' is essentially a preserve of the advanced groups. In this sense, orality and textuality are two basic elements of the aesthetic creativity of two different categories. Our attempts in this seminar will, however, be to seek an answer to a question: is it so? Our attempt will also be to examine the exact relationship between orality and textuality.

The other space is historiography. Currently, one school of historiography privileges oral over and along with written sources. Discussions and debates about, and analysis of oral sources or other 'oral history' have now become parts of a significant and influential academic discourse. For instance, what has come to be known as African school of historiography, demonstrates the power of oral sources and their influence on any kind of history. Those who privilege a 'history from below' to all kinds of history also follow the same kind of historiography. They believe that it is important to "examine the processes of history-making rather than the 'events' that those histories describe" (Singer, 1997: 11), and there lies the strength of oral history.

My attempt here will be to find an answer to the question how orality goes beyond its assigned and circumscribed domain and influences the processes of literary creativity and historiography. This may help us in negotiating the current interest in 'orality' in academic discourses: how and how far it goes beyond its assigned domain. This exercise may also help us in understanding the interface and interaction between the so-called folk and elite cultures.

The Interface and Interaction between 'Orality' and 'Textuality': The Folklorists' Viewpoints

We know that ordinarily 'verbal art', the name once given to literature in oral transmission, and the texts in print, or 'literature', are perceived as two separate categories of literary expressions of two distinct categories of people — the pre- or non-literate backward rural masses, and the literate and advanced urban groups with access to script, the print media and 'refined' tastes. Orality is the marker of the first, and scriptability and printability, of the second. And 'verbal art' and folklore were also taken as synonymous once.

Folklorists, however, soon realized that these distinctions are artificial and arbitrary. 'The identity of folklore and literature is an obvious fact', declared Archer Taylor in 1948 (Taylor in Dundes, 1965: 37). He proceeds further: 'If we state the history of a genre of folklore and the history of a genre of literature in general terms, we see that the workers in these two fields are trying to solve similar problems ... we set up definitions of each genre, we endeavour to trace each back to its origins, we discover stylistic variations and variations in subject matter that are

to be interpreted historically and evaluated critically' (*ibid* 37). What then are the differences between the two? Taylor says, 'An obvious difference is that folklore uses conventional themes and stylistic devices and makes no effort to disguise their conventional quality while the literary artist either divests his work of conventional quality by avoiding clichés of either form or, as Houseman does, charges them with new content'. (*ibid* 37-38).

Interestingly, we hear an echo of Taylor's statement, the statement of a folklorist, that, the distinction between 'orality' and 'textuality' is not in their essence but in devices only, when we come across Jacques Derrida's deconstructive critique of structural linguistics. An essayist has recently observed that 'the implication, in this respect, of DECONSTRUCTION is that speech and writing are similarly structured forms of REPRESENTATION rather than the first being a source of original meaning and the second is delayed, secondary expression in another medium' (Brooker 2003: 182).

It may be of interest also to note the views of a folk singer as reported by Blackburn and Ramanujan: 'When asked by one of us whether any "new stories were ever created", a Tamil singer replied that this would be impossible since all stories "grow from others". What about all the novels, history books, and so forth, published (in Tamil) in Madras? These, he said, were "created" in the same way as oral stories, they could not be individual efforts, he explained, but could only be written because so many other books already existed.' (Blackburn and Ramanujan, 1986: 1)

This statement of a folk singer may sound as naive but its essence cannot altogether be dismissed. That there is a sort of oral-written continuum in the literary expressions of a culture, has been recognized in both folkloric and literary criticisms. The statement of our folk singer may sound almost similar so what T. S. Eliot has to say in his essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent": 'What happens when a network of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it' (1974 : 17). 'Those works of art' would obviously include those in oral tradition.

This is what Taylor wanted to assert. Approaching the problem of the relationship between 'literature' and 'folklore' (primarily folklore expressed in words), he finds 'no fewer than three problems arising from

three different kinds of relationship: (1) folklore is, in many cultures, indistinguishable from literature; (2) literature contains elements borrowed from folklore; and (3) writers have imitated folklore' (Taylor: 37).

In the Indian context, [the intertextuality between the oral and the written has been described by Ramanujan as a 'transitive series', a 'scale of forms'. The oral and the written 'responding to one another' should be seen as 'engaged in continued and dynamic dialogic relations. Past and Present, what's "pan-Indian" and what's local, the written and the oral, the verbal and the non-verbal — all these are engaged in reworking and redefining relevant others. What are distinguished as "the classical", "the folk", and "the popular", as different works in Indian culture, will be seen as interesting continuum. Texts, then, are also contexts and pretexts for other texts. In our studies now, we are beginning to recognise and place folk texts in this over-present network of intertextuality for folktexts are pervasive, behind, under, and around all the texts of the society and in all its strata, not merely among the rural and the non-literate' (Ramanujan 1993 : XVIII).]

Evidences in 'Literature' and Literary Points of View

If the views of the folklorists are given due weight, there is a oral-written continuum in the literary traditions of a linguistic group with a cultural identity of its own. Nowhere in the world there has ever been a complete rupture in the relationship between the oral and the written.

Samuel Johnson, it is said, once described European literature as a series of footnotes to Homer (Fowler 1973: 73). This description may sound exaggerated but the extension of mythology and epic in European Literature is not altogether uncommon. There are enough evidences in modern European Literature how the epic vision of life and beauty over-whelmed its creation. And, epics are usually known to have drawn from oral traditions. We know that the Victorian definitions of epic used to speak of national themes. In India, *Rāmākathā* perhaps takes this position of pride. We also talk of the epic qualities of the writings of the authors like Tolstoy, James Joyce or Bertolt Brecht. when Halder Laxness of Iceland was awarded the Nobel in 1955, his magnum opus *The Independent People* was described as a modern *saga*. Even the oral tradition of a distant land inspired a modern narrative as is seen in Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*.

Mann has used an Indian oral text in this novella. Bertolt Brecht developed his concept of epic theatre and wrote many of his plays drawing extensively from oral traditions, both in content and form, of the eastern world. Two of Indian playwrights and producers, Habib Tanvir of Raipur and Ratan Thiyam of Imphal, are widely known for their preference for oral traditions in developing their own special kind of theatre.

Oral and written traditions often coexist. Borrowing from one to the other and dependence of one on the other has never ceased. What Blackburn and Ramanujan thought of 'folk' and 'classical' in Indian context, as 'codes in culture-wide diglossia, coexistent, cooperative and complimentary to each other as two ends of a continuum between the control and release of energy' (Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986: 23) can be thought of as a significant trait of the relationship between oral and written in India.

Coming to the contemporary literature, I can talk a little about a literature in one Indian language, Bangla, what I know. Modernity as is understood in reference to 'modernism' a western concept basically, began in nineteenth century colonial Bengal. Most of the early modern Bengali writers were English-educated. They were also accustomed partly to the contemporary European lifestyle. But intellectually and as creative persons never lost totally the moorings in the local traditions. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, an English-educated young man of early nineteenth century Kolkata, who opted for Christianity and the sophisticated western lifestyle, considered as the first modern Bengali poet, had, significantly, drawn most of the themes of his narrative poetry and dramas from the epic tradition of the *Rāmāyana*, which is recognized as a typical evidence of the axis between oral and written. Around the same time poets like Ishwar Gupta and Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, both protagonists of an ideal of employment of *deshi* (indigenous) expressions and dictions, created a parallel strand essentially local. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, an English-educated bureaucrat in colonial administration, recognized as the person who shaped the modern Bengali novel, once declared candidly that his one source of inspiration was the oral poetic dictions particularly that of the rural poet Ramprasad Sen. We have evidence to tell that the story-source of many of his novels were oral narratives. The story of *Durgeshnandini*, his

first novel in Bangla (he had earlier written a novel in English), was definitely drawn from a legend he had learnt from his grandfather. A critic has even suggested that the popularity of Bankim's novels, specially his first three, among the readers of different strata of people, was mainly because he followed a story pattern of *The Arabian Nights* and other popular types of narratives (Debes Ray 1989: 65). Rabindranath Thakur, a better known Bengali writer outside Bengal, and known as Tagore, always had a national agenda and discarded euro-centrism. His interest in, and assimilation of, oral traditions is a known fact. He is recognized as one of the pioneers in rejuvenating interests in local oral and other forms of folklore and led the groups of early Indian folklore researchers. In his creative literature, he tried to synthesize, like Madhusudan Dutt, the European, the Indian Classical-Sanskritic and the Bengali ethnic folkloric literary dictions. The post-Tagorian poets of twentieth century, at least many of them, traversed the same path.

In recent years, since the mid-seventies of the last century, there developed a literary movement in Bengal known as 'Uttar Adhunik' led by a group of young poets. They themselves preferred not to call it a movement. Their's was rather a point of view. 'Uttar-Adhunikata' may literally mean post-modernism but to those poet it would mean 'above' or 'beyond' modernism. The essence of this concept is to travel beyond Euro-centrist modernism, and even the Euro-American concept of post-modernism (Anjan Sen 1989). What then is the preferred space of creativity? One seems to be the ultimate philosophical space: 'By getting rid of modernism human civilization returns to the awareness of infinity' (Gupta 1991: 91) How infinity helps creativity? Referring to Nihar Ranjan Ray's concept of the play of time in creativity, they say, 'The happenings do not take place only once; they go on for ever and ever. They are indeed states of being, not moments' (Sen, *ibid*). They declare: 'With the triumphant *Uttar Adhunikata*, the infinity of time and space will gradually return to the world of man' (Gupta, *ibid*). What is this world of man? It is trans-national, transcultural. Its root is mythological, the oral-formulae — a tradition which evolves in response to the conditions of oral improvisation and which survives the test of time. This takes you to the world of orality and folktexts like the *Mangal Kāvya*s, the *Pāñcalis*, the *Brata Kathās* of Bengal (Gupta

1989: 58). They even speak of a 'decentralization of language': 'There is a positive shift from urban modern standard language used in Bengali poetry. It is *uttar-adhunik* poetry that created a space within which ancient, medieval and folk lyrical modes found new roles and functions. There are moving expressions of authentic experience. In fact, through them a new paradigm of *uttar-adhunik* poetry is created ... (It) is a combination of inner-cultural and inter-cultural relations. Therefore intertextuality is an important element...(This) concept of intertextuality can be observed in Indian classical poetics e.g. Abhinabha Gupta's *Dhwanyaloka* (app. 6th century) and also in verbal texts' (Anjan Sen, *ibid*).

Do we hear an echo of this manifesto of the *Uttar-Adhunik* poets of Bengal in A. K. Ramanujan's already quoted statement: 'In our studies now, we are beginning to recognize and place folk texts in this over-present network of textuality. For folktexts are pervasive, behind, under and around all the texts of the society and in all its starta, not merely among the rural and the non-literate.

Orality and Beyond: The Alternative Trends in Historiography

The second space where orality enters decisively, crossing its assigned domain, is the space of history. To examine the processes of history, a school of contemporary historians believes in the strength of oral narratives and take them not as 'simple unself-reflective memory' but rather as 'deliberately structured by their tellers for immediate purposes and audiences. And in producing their work, oral historians constantly negotiate between the past and the present' (Singer 1997: 7). They argue further: '“Oral history” is a particular form of narrative that intentionally shapes what the teller knows about past events in order to create meaning for them' (*ibid*: 8). This comes close to the observation of a folklorist: 'For centuries the oral narrative has come to mean the history of man, effectively doing the work what history ought to be doing — that of recording and accumulating events of human affairs' (Kharmawphlang, 2001).

Emphasis on 'memory' and its authenticity is the core factor in the approaches of this school of thought. In most cases (this is the view of a few historians and readers of 'history'), the 'memory' in written documents is often circumscribed and even contaminated by bias in an

exercise in power and cultural hegemony. Interest in orality, exhibited by this section of academia can perhaps be seen as a corrective to such hegemonic trends. They want to see 'historical events' through oral accounts as alternative discourses to what is available in reported, recorded and transcreated written history. Many oral accounts, they find, are also responses to what the documented history has to say. In the process, history itself is redefined and revisited. Oral narratives demonstrate their power in shaping an alternative history, more subtle and authentic.

This is one way of correcting the 'distorted' history by examining the accounts available in oral discourse. This becomes very useful in writing a narrative of more immediate past 'events'. Another way of looking for historical information in oral sources is not about 'events' but about the processes of social formations of a community who does not have a written history of their own. This approach looks for not the narratives only but everything oral, i.e., all the aspects and sectors of folklore. That helps in building up the social history called People's History. 'Every people has a history of their own. If, however, we limit our idea of history to that of written records, then only we discover a people without any history... (A historiographer) is to treat history not in terms of chronology, achievements or downfalls of dynasties, and battles, but in terms of people — how they have shaped their lives and institutions, their history, culture and character' (Sen 1985: 3). And, 'It is the people's history which is the real history ... to be discovered in the folkways, the folk religion, and ultimately the socio-political institutions, based on the economic life of the people... That is the logic of history and that logic is to be found through a sociological outlook and analysis...' (Ray 1956. Translated and quoted in Sen 1985: 7). A good number of historians have depended upon and utilised oral accounts of the life and society of the so-called marginalized people to build up, what in their opinion, is the alternative but true history. Some call it 'people's history' (Morton 1938), some call it 'history from the bottom up' or 'proctological history' (Cohn 1994), or some by the general terms of 'oral history' (Vansina 1985, Chief John Snow 1977, Singer 1997). What is common to all of them is their reliance on oral accounts as Vansina declares, 'Oral tradition should be central to students of culture, of ideology, of society, of psychology, of art, and finally of

history' (1994: 39). Badrinarayan, while documenting dissent in socio-political life of a people, distinguishes *Kathā* (story) and *itihās* (history).

The term 'story' (*Kathā*) is different from both 'History' as established by academic historians and 'Itihas' as defined by traditionalist historians, as an Indian way to know the past. In fact, the way 'Itihās' has been defined by a group of historians stretches its roots to Puranic stories. 'Itihās' in this sense stands for the story of a dominant tradition. On the other hand, the term 'story' liberates even marginalised groups of Indian society and enable them to enter the meaningful domain of knowing, inventing, creating the telling of the past as a constant dialogue with the present. The 'Story' is not the fiction or fictional narrative of the printed literary world. The 'Story' as narrated by communities is not just fiction. It is an existential narrative reflecting living cultural contexts (Badrinarayan 2001: 15-16).

I have discussed all these ideas at length and the interface between folklore in two of my essays in two of my recent publications. (Sen 2003, 2006).

In approaching history, these historiographers rely heavily on 'collective memory' that is available mistily in oral traditions. Orality, in these attempts, is absorbed in a fruitful understanding of the contexts they opt for studying. These writers, in search of a true perception of memory or 'Sociology of Memory' as emphasized by the Critical School, especially by Herbert Marcuse, obviously take a position that it is an important creative force of self and social life. Oral tradition, in such a perspective, is the other name of the collective memory.

Postscript

Interest in orality, exhibited by the academia in the recent past, rests basically on this perception of memory and in search of an answer to the question: What is the relationship between orality and textuality and what is the level of inter-textuality between and and written. The answer, gained through experiences is: 'The relations between oral and written traditions in any culture are not simple oppositions. They interpenetrate each other and combine in various ways' (Ramanujan 1990: 8).

This exciting finding may provide new and fresh insight in understanding the structured forms of representation and communication in human society and culture.

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FOLKTALE, NORTH-EAST INDIA AND A TALE-TYPE INDEX

The folktale is one of the genres of folklore, which is also popular in printed forms, and some oral versions do exist as active tradition in many areas of the world. This genre first appeared in the printed form in 1697 in French (Stein 2000: 167). Its English term is 'fairy-tale' and the term 'folktale' is mainly used by the anthropologists and folklorists to refer to any tale derived from or existing in oral tradition. 'Fairy tale' refers to a genre of prose literature, which may or may not be based on oral tradition (Idem). 'Folktale' is a translation of the German word 'Volksmärchen'. Major interest in folktale began with the publication of Grimm Brothers' *Kinderund-Hausmärchen* ('Children's and Household Tales') in 1812. Publication of collections of oral folktales in printed forms are drawing a large number of readers and folktale plots have become a favourite subject of children plays, animation films and cartoons.

The study of folktale as a subject of folklore began at the beginning of the 19th century. Although orality is the forte of folktale, however, for the purpose of study, scholars have always depended on literary sources of folktale. The scholarly folktale study began in Europe fuelled by a desire to show the world that the nations in the periphery of Europe had a glorious past and colourful history. Countries like Germany and the Scandinavian region (Finland, Denmark and Norway) began collecting their folktales, legends and ballads that assumed considerable national-cultural significance (Apo 1995 : 17).

The earliest type of folktale scholarship was comparative in nature — scholars were engaged in finding out the origin, meaning, dissemination and variation in folktales and relations of different forms of folktales. Various theories, like the Grimm Brothers' belief that folktales were the inheritance of a common 'Indo-European past' (Stein 2000: 168), Max Müller's 'Solar-Mythological' or 'Comparative Mythological theory',

Theodore Benfey's 'Indianist theory' and the most important, the Finnish 'Historical / Geographic' method of Kaarle Krohn and others, were propagated. The last method constituted the research paradigm in the first half of the 20th century. Another important folktale scholarship is the 'Structural study of folktale' envisaged by Russian formalist scholar Vladimir Propp and others.

Tale-Type Index

A tale-type index is a catalogue of folktales that has been prepared after a logical, systematic classification of the tales and ordering, listing and indexing the tales in a proper way. With the inception of folktale study, scholars felt the necessity of a scientific classification for listing and cataloguing the folktales for a proper and systematic study. For such a catalogue, there must be classifications "...that are reasonably logical and reasonably complete, that are applicable to the material everywhere, and that are not too cumbersome to be easily learned and used" (Thompson 1977: 414). Even Vladimir Propp, who outrightly rejected the idea of type, said, "Correct classification is one of the first steps in a scientific description" (Propp 1968: 5).

The first attempt at a logical ordering of folktales was made by I G von Hahn in 1864; his system is now only of historical interest as it contained a relatively small number of tales and it was much concerned with correlating modern folktales with Greek myths. A serious attempt was made by Joseph Jacobs in 1891, who attempted to construct a comprehensive list of catch words. However, this also marked no real progress towards a classification as it was merely an alphabetical list of motifs and types indiscriminately mixed (Thompson 1977: 414).

The Aarne-Thompson Type Index

It was the Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne, who prepared the first comprehensive, logical 'type index' of folktale (1910) with the advice of Kaarle Krohn and help of Oscar Heckman (Helsinki), Axel Olrik (Copenhagen), Johannes Bolte (Berlin) and C. W. von Sydow (Lund). Aarne explained that the type index was prepared to remove the difficulties in studying comparative folk-literature (Aarne 1910: 8E as cited by Thompson 1977: 416). He classified folktales into 'tale-types' and this classification was based on the Finnish archive collections, the

Dannish Collections of Svend Grundtvig and the Grimms' tales. This index has been revised and reviewed many times. Stith Thompson revised it in 1961 adding and deleting a few sub-categories and the index has come to be known as the 'Aarne Thompson' types of the folktale. In this typology, altogether 2499 number of tale-types have been identified and these have been classified in four broad classes: Animal Tales (AT 1-299), Ordinary Folktales (AT-300-1199), Jokes and Anecdotes (AT 1200-2399) and Unclassified Tales (AT 2400-2499). The first three broad classes have again been subdivided. The prefix AT has been assigned to each number. Thompson has defined type as "...a traditional tale that has an independent existence" (Thompson 1977: 415). Till today, this tale-type index has framed the standard reference for any serious study of folktale.

Folktales in North East India

The term 'North East India' — or simply the 'North East' — obviously refers to the geographical location of the region that comprises of seven units, viz., the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. Topographically this region of India lies in an extension of the sub-Himalayan zone consisting of lofty mountains terrains and moderately high-hilly tracts interspersed with plateau and riverfed valleys. This geographical and topographical situation has made north-eastern India a homogenous zone, and barring a narrow corridor, this region has literally been cut off from the rest of the country. Apart from a geographic topographic distinctiveness, culturally and in population pattern also, this region has a particular identity. Since very early times, the North East has been the home of the 'Kirātas' or the 'Indo-Mongoloids', although Austric and Dravidian sub-strata have been discerned by the scholars in the racial and cultural make up of this region. Later on, waves of Aryan culture have swept over parts of the region—particularly the valleys in Assam, Manipur and Tripura. This resulted in Aryanization and the more Aryanized of them began speaking a Sanskritic tongue (e.g., the Assamese). However, the predominance of the Indo-Mongoloid racial and cultural features is too obvious. Members of tribal groups like the Santhals, the Gonds, etc. have also migrated from Central India to Assam and they brought their folklore along with them. The diverse

cultural patterns of the North-East have aptly been reflected in the folktales and other narratives of this region.

Classification and Typological Study of Folktales in North-East India

Although North-East India has been referred to, with justification, as the 'folklorist's paradise' because of the presence of an almost bewildering cultural and folkloristic variety and with a huge stock of folklore materials — both verbal and nonverbal — till date, no full-length study has been undertaken to classify, list, index and catalogue these. Of course, some good and extensive studies of folktales have been done, particularly in Assam. Collection of tales began in the end of the 19th century (J. D. Anderson's *Kachari Folktales and Rhymes* in 1895, G. A. Grierson's collection of Assamese tales in *The Linguistic Survey of India* Vol. (II) (2) in 1903, etc). Dr. P. Goswami, the doyen of folklore study in the entire North-East and one of the earliest scholars to study folklore in India, initiated classification and motif analysis of Assamese folktales (1960) and heralded a new chapter in the folklore study in the North-East. In his *Ballads and Tales of Assam* (1960), he classified Assamese tales into five classes following Thompson (1946). These are: Animal Tales, Tales of the supernatural, Jokes and Humorous Tales, Trickster Tales and Cumulative Tales (Goswami 1970: 85-114). He also searched for affinities and parallels of Assamese tales and the modifications which they seem to have undergone from the probable earlier sources or at least provable earlier versions. He searched these among classical literary sources or versions, among central Indian tribes among Assam tribes and among international types. He said that many Assamese wonder tales have parallels in 'Jātakas' and in other Indian languages like Bengali and Gujarati. Again, some wonder tales have parallels among Central Indian tribes. Many Assamese trickster, cumulative and humorous tales have close affinity among Assam tribes. A few Assamese tales conform to the 'Cinderella cycle' of International types (ibid: 116-155). In this work, Goswami has also prepared a short Motif index of available Assamese materials (ibid : 174-255).

Typological Study of Assamese Folktales

Goswami has opened the scope of typological discussion of Assamese folktales by identifying the types of the tales in his collection *Tales*

of Assam (1980). Here, he has attempted to identify the type numbers of the tales, wherever possible; by following the Aarne-Thompson tale typology and the Thompson-Roberts typology (1960) and has identified types of 67 tales out of 127. In the remaining tales, Goswami has identified the motif numbers. He has noticed that some Assamese tales and their versions in Rabha, Khasi and other languages, do not find place in the Aarne-Thompson typology (1980: 301). Thus, Goswami has elevated the standard of folktale research in Assam upto the level of comparative 'international folkloristics'. Nevertheless, no full-length study of tales and examinations of the relevance of international indexes and preparation of a tale-type index has been attempted.

The author of this paper has studied the narrative structure of 69 Assamese tales in his Ph.D. thesis and has identified the type numbers of 60 tales, and motif numbers in some. He has observed that in some Assamese tales, there are episodes at the beginning and the end involved with members of a larger family unit. These episodes which are related to hero's relationship with concerned relatives have impact on the composition of the tales. Although general type numbers of these tales have been identified, but the Aarne-Thompson type index does not provide us with information of the tales where a hero goes out for the benefit of members of a large family. Culturally speaking, the social ethos of Indian societies uphold duties and responsibilities for members of a joint family. The Aarne-Thompson typology also contains limited number of tales dealing with relationships of brothers and sisters (AT 450-459) and we do not find the importance given in the narratives on the parents in the AT index, which, otherwise, is noticed in many Assamese tales (Medhi 2004: 222-23).

So far, this much typological study of Assamese folktales has been done. There may be some sporadic and individual study, but no such full-length study has been undertaken till date, either in Assam or in any part of the North East.

Necessity of a North-East India Tale-Type Index

Keeping in view the diverse cultural patterns of this region and the abundance of folktales, for academic study and proper indexing and cataloguing, the need of a full-fledged Aarne-Thompsonian kind of tale-type index for North East India has been felt since long. Similar attempts

have been made in some others parts of the country. Due to modernisation and other factors, many folkloristic materials of this beautiful region are on the verge of being forgotten. So, it can be pertinently argued that the formulation of a North East India tale-type indeed has become an absolute necessity and such kind of a tale index will go a long way in cataloguing, recording and indexing the folktales of different communities living in this geographically homogenous region. This kind of an index will be very useful for any serious study of folktales of this region and that shall frame the standard reference to any data regarding folktales of North East India.

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ORAL FRAMES OF REFERENCES: KHASI MYTH CHANTING AND PERSPECTIVES OF DEFINITION

A significant corpus of scholarly efforts is devoted to oral tradition and the exploration of the fundamental issues that it excites. While some folklorists are concerned with the poetics that constitute the underpinnings of orality, others engage their energy in broad and often tedious comparative analysis tasks. All these investigations have yielded brilliant results and have produced an explosion of activities in folklore research the world over.

To borrow a term from filmdom, the more significant full screen research are those of the Homeric epics which were purely oral and which were primarily standardized during the Panathenaic Festival of the sixth century BC. Investigation into these oral derived texts have to contend with a little known period of history stretching from the eighth century BC to the tenth century AD — i.e., nearly two millennia.¹ Other earlier academic enterprises of equal scale worth mentioning were the efforts of Theodore Benfey whose contribution to Indian studies was the translation of, and commentary on, the *Pañcatantra*, which he completed in 1859. Not only did his translation popularize Indian story literature in the European imagination, it also raised new questions in academic circles concerning the diffusion theory of story-theme migration.

Oral is a variously construed term to apply to the myriad genres of composition and performance around the world that can be placed in the rubric of oral traditional texts. Oral literature research is a stupendous task, which stipulates a disciplined pursuance of the various methodologies to be employed. North East India offers a vast scope for oral tradition studies, which, if properly conducted, will contribute unique dimensions to the discourse. While there are generic dynamics inherent in the orality shared between and among the ethnic communities

of the region, each community, I believe, could again exhibit traits that are at once idiosyncratic and heuristic. There are ethnic communities that have had for a long time, the advantage of script (whether borrowed or indigenously evolved), others have experienced the iconic written paradigm only as a result of white colonial and proselytizing interventions. These situations offer ideal opportunities for the study of the text and its transmission models, archaeo-graphical details or the examination of “concordance interpolation”,² (a process of adding lines to the canonical text). In societies where written cultural productions were attempted only as recently as less than two hundred years, academic stimulations could be directed towards the oral-derived texts, genre dependence and tradition dependence studies.

The multi-layering of other socio-cultural and political dynamics creates a fantastic canvas that would require the investment of resources and the convergence of professional interest to take up for inquiry the almost inexhaustible material that make up the ethno-noetic plenum³ of our own North East India. Suffice it to say, at this point, that all this is being said with the singular objective of making a plea to all here to prepare ourselves as stakeholders and stewards, to shoulder the responsibility of articulating this oral and intangible heritage. In trying to address the issues of orality, I shall try to examine the referential constructs provided by canonical exegesis and locate the performance of a Khasi myth chanting as a diorama for case study.

A host of folklore scholars have stubbornly maintained that myth is always connected with ritual whether as a description or a mode of justifying the efficacy of it.⁴ Having studied the present myth in its totality of performance, application and contextual innateness, it is extremely difficult to pinpoint where the myth ends or ritual begins and vice versa. What can be said with certainty is that myth chanting involves a specialized system of knowledge employing its own dissemination canons. The egg divination ceremony myth is a classic example of the kind of myth that has been excellently defined by the late Lauri Honko, as having four criteria i.e., form, content, function and context setting out clearly the different levels relevant to the concept of myth.⁵

Myth chanting or singing is intrinsic to indigenous Khasi religion and constitutes a very important oral discourse used as they are during

the performance of ceremonies and rituals and during the performances of augury and divination. Khasi commonly used water, leaves, lime, rice grains, oil and the egg for divination purposes. This last is extremely important not only because it is only used by the very skilled augur, but because of the way in which it is done and the things which are used. This performance is called *Ka shat pyrein*. The things used in this ceremony are: (i) *Ka lengkhan* or an egg used for divination (ii) *Ka Diplin* or a rectangular wooden slab with a small hollowed out projection for keeping soil (iii) a fistful of mud (iv) rice grains and (v) water.

The divination myth has a form that is both narrative as well as dramatic. It is an enactment in which the celebrant virtually assumes the different roles of the characters involved and at the same time, sustains the main-line narration through chanting. The performance is suffused with great drama and remarkable telling skill where word power, actions, gestures and voice modulation conflate into a total experience. The content of the chant is cosmogony-oriented in that it talks about significant universal events. It contains lengthy discourses on traditional governance systems, animal species classification, cosmology, geographical descriptions and assorted knowledge systems. The myth is driven by an ontological concern that constitutes the function and lastly as a context, it is apprehended by a ritual performance.

One of the most skillful augurs who do this performance is U Dising Marin of Pahamshken village on the northern slopes of Khasi Hills. I am fortunate to have been accepted by him and his village and I have seen him perform many rituals on countless occasions during the ten years of our friendship.

He would carefully prepare for the ceremony by washing the *Diplin Diknor* and would have the necessary things near at hand. Then he would start chanting while taking the egg in his right palm and rice grains in his left. He would place some rice grains on the four corners of the *Diplin Diknor* as he chants. He would then engage in a dialogue with the egg all the while rolling it slowly in his palm. The dialogue that he engages in is a recounting of a myth by chanting. While still chanting (and the chant is sometimes of one hour duration) he would smear mud on the egg while continuously rolling it in the palm of his hand.

The way in which the story element in the myth is presented is not in a style popular with ordinary hearthside audiences, because the performance is too intense, too powerful in a totally involved and absorbed way. All the while he is occupied with the egg, smearing it with mud, rolling it in the palm of his hand and placing it on the *Diplin*. He urges the egg to show him the signs that will manifest themselves in *ka lar* and *ka kem*, broken egg shells lying, respectively, on their convex and concave sides.

U. Dising Marin's narration is fraught with terms and usages, sounds and exclamations, which are impervious to direct translation and I have reasons to believe that many are esoteric. I have also rendered some sense translation, which is opposed to "meaning" translation. The point I am trying to make is that one has to be there to even begin to absorb the telling power.

The performance of *Ka shat pyrlein* is an extremely elaborate affair and from it emanates one of the most important myths of the Khasis which recounts the fetching of the sun by the rooster from the *Lamet Latang* cave. This myth constitutes a belief, which is central to Khasi religious thought and system.

In the *Shat Pyrlein* ceremony, we find a combination of elemental things used to supplement the human role and aspect: the egg, *ka diplin diknor*, rice grain and mud. *Ka diplin diknor* is exclusively made of the wood of a tree which has been felled by lightning. It is a metonymic device used to represent the veranda of the sun. Dising often refers to it as containing stories which is a figurative way of saying that the use of *ka diplin diknor* effectively keeps alive the folk memory and history.

The divination chant is used and reused for as long as there is a need for it and in this, it presents itself as a multiplicity of variants. By going through the process of repetition, it gets reinvented. In the village community, I detect no attempts made to record the chants either by scribal or electronic agency although there are sufficiently literate individuals and some do possess tape recorders. On enquiry, I was told, "these stones are there always". This reply quite perturbed me although I knew that the Divination Myth chanting is something that the performer, U. Dising Marin had inherited from his maternal uncle, U. Niwan. The tradition has been passed down through five generations.⁶

In fact U. Dising disclosed to me that when he was a small boy, his clan identified and “dedicated” him, as being special because his deceased maternal grand uncle had made a visitation (*sajan*) on him through signs and portents recognizable only by the clan. From that stage onwards, he was treated differently and he had to go through a long apprenticeship under the tutelage of his maternal uncle. He is now, in turn, passing on this knowledge system to his nephew, U. Hasing Lyngdoh Marin who assists him nowadays in the performance of ceremonies.

This information made me recognize the workings of the cognitive patterns of a memory shared by a community and which operates in the present even if the traditions are thought of in the past. While recollecting this past, the tradition gets processed through reinterpretation so that it becomes applicable to contemporary needs and realities.

The myth is driven by an ontological concern that constitutes the function and lastly, as a context, it is apprehended by a ritual performance. As I had mentioned earlier, the chanting involves the narration of a sacred myth of Khasis, which is dramatized in very bold strokes. The ‘fall from grace’ paradigm is brought about by human covetousness, avarice and disharmony with the natural world (to name a few transgressions). The periods of darkness and deprivation are depicted in frightening details. When order is restored and the sun is brought out from the Lamet Latang cave, there is great rejoicing in the mythic community of humans, animals and the natural world, which is palpably experienced by the audience as well.

As an effective and often performed chant, the divination myth, during the process of transmission, carries endogenous systems of knowledge, that are meaningful to the recipients (audience and the party for whom the divination is performed) although the cognitive responses may differ.

The performance of the chant as a complete ceremony creates the essential spatial environment intrinsic to the tradition. The use of the metonymic object such as the egg, *ka diplin diknor*, rice grain, mud and water (which are elemental in nature) are part of the spatial and contextual dispensation of the ceremony. The actions, motions of the body, intonation, voice modulation, while having their own unique semiotic value, infuses a sense of aura that couches the ceremony in arcana.

The tradition of chanting proves to be a significant genre for comprehensive research. As a conduit of expression and communication, it thrives on an autonomous existence, without indicating any need for rescue from obliteration or resorting to be inspired by a written parallel. It has been vibrant over hundreds of years because the community that has use for it sustains it by collective interpretation and re-interpretation.

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ORALITY IN PRINT: BEZBAROA'S COLLECTION OF FOLK-TALES AND THE NATIONALITY DISCOURSE IN ASSAM

In a short story published in *Sadhukathar Kuki* Bezbaroa depicted a poignant scene — a man on a pleasure boat trip across the river Ganges heard a female voice singing a song of the popular folktale 'The Kite's Daughter'. In the tale the helpless adopted daughter of the kite sings the song asking help from her foster mother — a kite. The song taken from the tale introduces a rhetorical element in the story. The author describes intimate feeling of a fellow Assamese in a distant place evoked by this song and the mother in the tale at one level could be identified as the mother Assam. Thus we notice a symbolic representation of Assameseness. The girl lost in the crowd of Calcutta seems to be Assamese society caught in the web of modernity and colonialism. We observed that Bezbaroa used the folktale as a prime identity marker and also notice that a folktale figure can be a source of inspiration at the time of crisis. His ideas on folklore were shaped by European nationalistic scholarship in the nineteenth century.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1865-1938) is one of the greatest writers Assam has ever produced. The mission of his life was to rejuvenate national life of Assam. To fulfill it he and his friends started publication of a journal *Jonaki* (literally, firefly). In the 'darkness' of Assam some youths tried to bring sparks of light and thus the metaphor of enlightenment inspired them. However, his project was also committed to the goal of strengthening the national life. Metaphorically they expressed that they wanted to infuse moonlight in the spiritual life of Assam. The discourse of modern Assamese culture eventually articulated the need of enlightenment and preservation of tradition together (Guha 1991: 209-13).

The nationality discourse in Assam made development of language a central concern for the people. In the initial years people like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Hemchandra Barua were busy

in social reform and development of Assamese language. The reformist discourse of that time reflect those issues. Bezbaroa became more involved with the future of Assamese nationality and his concerns cover numerical, educational, physical, economic and moral development of the nation. He discussed such issues several times. In 1916 he addressed students and inspired them to develop Assamese society and culture. In his autobiography he mentioned that these aims inspired them to publish the journal *Jonaki*. The influence of Indian nationalistic discourse on him and his contemporaries was not deep as the historical compulsion of protecting the interest of the regional Assamese nationalism loomed large over their minds.

The discourse of the invention of modern Assamese culture (in the sense Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1999, used the term) became more well defined and specific in the writings of Bezbaroa. The demographic and linguistic compulsions prompted him to argue for a larger Assamese society incorporating local tribes and discover gems of traditional Assamese literature. Furthermore, he stressed the importance of children literature for strengthening national life. He described children as the architects of the future society and thought that literature for them should contain glorious stories, praise of the heroes and should reflect self control, patriotism, moderation from atrocities or excess in anything and faith in religion. These objectives brought him to the folktales which he heard in his childhood from a distant grandfather. This concerned man created a representation of Assamese culture. Banikanta Kakati (1981:127) wrote "...every nation is encircled by an idea system and the range of this idea system indicates the high / low stage of the mental development of that nation." He said that Bezbaroa's ideas enriched Assamese nation and must be always reflected in Assamese life and culture (*ibid.* 133). In the same article Kakati noted the contributions of Bezbaroa to rejuvenate Assamese language, bring recognition to Assamese Vaisnavism and develop language and culture through creative writings as well as rediscovery of folk traditions. The representation of modern Assamese culture crystallized with the efforts of Bezbaroa.

Bezbaroa published his folktales between 1910 to 1913. He published 65 folktales in three books and included two more in a short story collection published in the same period. If we regard versions of the four tales published in *Junuka* as separate tales then the number becomes 71. Three of these versions are in verse and the fourth one

is a brief adaptation. Most of the tales in this collection are fables. It was his collection of moral folktales and shows his relationship with folklore as a form of children literature and instrument of socialization. However, in the first publication *Burhi Air Sadhu* [BAS] (literally *Tales of Grandmother*) we observe an awareness of national tradition. In the preface of this celebrated collection he described folktales as expressions of national life and autobiography of a nation. He showed his familiarity with the folklore movement in Europe and mentioned works of Herder and Grimms and Indo-European theory of migration of tales. He pointed out the two-fold purpose of narration of tales: moral education and entertainment. He collected tales from a cross section of castes and from different parts of Assam. He also admitted that he collected several versions of many tales and the printed versions are results of his 'additions and subtractions' and written in his own language. He also made it clear that a few tales were written by him in the folktale discourse. Such tales are found more in number in his collection *Kakadeuta aru Nati Lora* (KNL). In this book he wrote an Assamese version of Anderson's *Emperor's New Clothes* and also created Assamese versions of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Sit Vasanta* and *Sonar Kathi Rupa Kathi*. In this type of transcreation he adapted the tales in Assamese tale environment and these will qualify as ecotypes. However, we don't have evidence that Bezbaroa adopted two tales and a few motifs from Mitra Majumdar's *Thakumar Jhuli* except the difference of plot units from other Assamese tales and striking similarity with the Bengali counterpart. All this evidence suggests that in the truest sense he created the genre of literary folktales in Assam.

In India, in the same period we notice the trend of publication of literary folktales but his purpose was more focused towards the project of invention of tradition. He wrote in the same preface : "Language and folktales are flesh and blood of a nation. The Assamese people call their language mother and folktales as *sadhukatha* (literally pious and truthful discourse). He also argued that the existence of a different tradition of folktales establishes the fact that Assamese is a separate language and different from Bengali."

It has been noted that mainly for two reasons he collected and published folktales. The first reason was the necessity for collection of the rich literary heritage of the Assamese for the development of modern Assamese culture. The importance of old materials in Assamese

language was articulated by him several times. For instance, in his autobiography and the presidential address he delivered the 1924 session of Assam Sahitya Sabha he emphasized the necessity of collecting old manuscripts and folklore. Secondly, he was deeply aware of the 'utilitarian moralism' of folktales. His writings on the development of Assamese life were aimed at improving the moral aspects of Assamese society. The nationality discourse in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Assam was more concerned with these issues. Bezbaroa was one of the spokesmen of the necessity of building strong moral character. He also inherited the legacy of the mid-nineteenth century discourse of the Assamese intellectuals whose critical discussion of social life in Assam was part of a reformist national agenda and project of building modern Assam in the age of reason (Guha 1991: 212-16). He wrote some short pieces for moral education and socialization of children. For instance, he wrote a book about building strong moral character and the name of the book is *Bakhar* (literally glow of a gem).

In Europe Perrault's, Grimms' and Anderson's literary folktales were some kind of interventions in the folklore discourse. Scholars have pointed out that the creators of literary folktales have infused their individual ideology in tales and attempted to establish models of behaviour for children. Zipes (1988: 14) writes, "In fact, literary fairy tales differed remarkably from their precursors, the oral folktales, by the manner in which they portrayed children and appealed to them as a possibly distinct audience." He also maintains, "Educated writers purposely appropriated the oral folktale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners so that children would become civilized according to the social code of that time." He borrows a phrase from Jameson to describe composition of literary folktales as a symbolic act and symbolic discourse on the civilizing process served as the basis of literary folktales. Zipes claims, "They legitimized the normative standard of civilite through their symbolic constructs, configuration, and plots of their tales."

Bezbaroa's comments on folktales confirm that he published folktales for using them in the civilizing process. More specifically for building moral and spiritual character of the Assamese. Instances of cruelty and other immoral acts in the tales may detract an observer but inevitably cruelty is always punished and good persons win fortune. We will illustrate

the point later. Overwhelming moral concern inspired Bezbaroa to suppress trickster tales. For example, in his collections we do not find a single example of tales of the Assamese trickster Teton. Probably, in those tales, cleverness, mischievous acts and misdeeds of the trickster predominate and he considered them unsuitable for children and thought that they would project weakness of the national tradition. Selection is an universal process and writers like Perrault and Grimms excluded many well known folktales from their collections (Zipe 1988: 31).

Bezbaroa thought folktales would inspire children to become ideal Assamese and in this way the future of the nation will be fortified. Narration of folktales was thus not only related with civilizing and socializing process but also for constructing ideals and higher morals supposedly inherent in the tradition. In the collection KNL we notice a framing device: inclusion of conversation between a grandfather and grandson. After telling the last tale the grand father goes for pilgrimage. He completes his moral responsibility of socializing his grandson which was the practice in Assamese society. The para texts in the form of conversations also deal with moral issues reflected in the texts. The aged grandfather teaches importance of study, truthfulness, obedience, unity, respect for elders, value of practical judgment in human life and faith in god. The appending of these para texts as the frame of the texts reveals his interpretation of tales and places story telling / reading in the context of educative discourse. We notice the grandfather saying folktales irrespective of their sizes are as precious as gold.

Selected tales uphold honesty, kindness, courage, intelligence, truthfulness and sympathy and faith in god. Deception, cruelty, jealousy, rivalry, pride, dishonesty and misdeeds are punished in the tales. It can be conjectured that he added the episodes of punishments to the tales. For example, I have noticed that in an oral version of the 4th tale of KNL collected from Lakhimpur district that cruel punishment for lying is absent. In the oral version lying unfolds further actions and the king is ridiculed (Sharma 1922). Bezbaroa's tale is short and ends with the punishment for lying. I have also collected a version of the 17th tale and that also confirm our assumption. Goswami (1980: 154) presents a version of the 22nd tale collected from the oral tradition and we make similar observations. The general scheme is that immoral behaviour brings misfortune. He was a religious person and his discovery of

national life was closely related with his religious faith. In a letter to Mohan Chandra Mahanta we wrote that when the Assamese people would whole-heartedly understand that Shankardev is the soul of Assam and cultivate his teachings and ideals Assam would become free.

On the other hand, there are tales that uphold unity and solidarity of the people. The tale about a blind man and a hunchback illustrates how unity can bring a fortune. This tale included in KNL has thematic resemblance with another tale about an Elephant and Owl in the same book. I have noticed in an available oral version that when Siva gives order that the elephant can't be eaten the tale ends. But in the written version two friends become overjoyed: a kind of celebration of unity. There is a possibility that Bezbaroa himself wrote at least some of their elements. His satirical pieces of Kripabar Barbarua also pay serious attention to the issue of national unity and such concern for unity was not limited to regional nationalism. He attended four Congress sessions till 1906 (Guha: 1988: 64). However, his main concern was Assamese nationalism.

In his youth, Assamese middle class was not deeply involved in the freedom movement. His attitude towards the colonial government was also ambivalent. Nevertheless the tales contain comments on kingship and justice. The plots of the tales show that a bad king is reformed by his officials and subjects. In BAS we find an Assamese version of the tale 'In the kingdom of foolishness' (AT 1534). The version ends with the execution of the king unlike the Kannada version. In KNL several tales deal with the issue of kingship. The Assamese version of 'Emperor's New Clothes' also contain elements of the Kannada tale mentioned above like the whims of the king. However, in the Assamese version, a brave man, not an innocent child, gathers courage to point out that the king is naked. The weavers argue that if a king can make unjust legislation then others can also make false claim. Finally, the weavers are rewarded. All tales about the kingship are concerned with justice. However, the kings are not dethroned or subjected to severe humiliation. We have already observed that in the fourth tale of KNL we do not notice the humiliation of the king noticed in the oral counterpart.

Another major theme expressed in the plots of the tales is intelligent wins fortune. The social change in the colonial period opened up scope for social mobility. For socialization of children, qualities like initiative, enterprise and intelligence became important virtues to be instilled. We notice that tales highlight these values and one tale especially

emphasizes the necessity of education. However, social change and construction of identity have not significantly altered the cultural discourse of caste, social hierarchy and religion. The discourse of his tales are laden with aristocratic and high caste discourse. Even in a tale he makes a distinction between neo rich and established rich families and he was biased towards aristocratic families. Moreover he had strong faith in religion. In a tale a pious Brahmin goes to ask god why he is poor. I have collected an oral version where a person goes to god to ask when he will marry and the plot develops like the published versions and ends exactly in the same way. But in the oral version the protagonist is introduced as an idiot who believes that it is possible to meet god. But pious Bezbaroa wanted children to develop faith in god and might have edited the text he used.

Bezbaroa's tales embody patriarchal-feudal values of the middle class of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The middle class emerged from the feudal background and came into contact with the reform movements in Calcutta. Their reformist agenda has not targeted the authoritarian role of father or husband in the family. However, like Bengal women's education was not related with radical change of their role in family. On the contrary good house keeping was extolled. In 1909 Benudhar Rajkhowa published his book *Lakhimi Tirota* idealizing the image of good housewife expert in sewing, cooking, and weaving who embodies other virtues as the human counterpart of goddess Lakshmi (Saikia 2000: 179). In BAS we notice a tale under the same title which projects the view that a good housewife protects a house and averts misfortune. Nonetheless except this concession, women are otherwise presented in the tales as *pativrata* i.e., devoted and loyal wife. In the tales we notice that unfaithful wives are punished. The tales broadly support gender and authority structure of the traditional society. The only noticeable departure is that right of the most efficient and capable persons of the same social category is privileged in the discourse of several tales.

An important point could be made here that interpretation of literary folktales must be different from the analysis of the same literary texts regarded as documentation of oral tales. Bezbaroa's use of folktales for socialization and construction of social roles can be interpreted from the surface text. However, when we analyse the same text as a trace of an oral discourse, we examine the Assamese tradition and its intertextual dimensions and rhetorical features for decoding the hidden meaning of a tale. In such cases we can restore the muted voices behind the nationalistic and moralizing discourse.

While Bezbaroa corpus has been regarded by the middle class as their heritage, he made an explicit statement that he had reworked the texts and composed some new tales. In the last hundred years certainly his literary versions have also influenced oral tales as Degh observes in case of Grimms' tales (Degh 1995 : 271-272). He established the literary genre of Assamese folktale with a specific purpose. In his address to Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1924 he compared the condition of Assamese society with the trope of seed of a tree which will sprout in future. Similarly he also hoped that his folktales will also contribute in the process of development of the national character. Behind the texts of his folktales lurks nationality discourse and religious utterances rooted in the colonial social formation and the position of the Assamese middle class. The middle class produced folktale texts to encounter the hegemonic colonial rulers and the threat of the cultural domination by the Bengalis. But in the process, Jameson would say, they have neutralized and universalized the forms of expressions of the popular, the subordinate and the dominated.

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HOME AND THE WORLD: WOMEN AND NATIONALISM IN THE NOVELS OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

The Indian school of Subaltern Studies, following the lead of Partha Chatterjee in *The Nation and its Fragments* and his other essays on women and nationalism¹, decided long ago that Indian / Bengal's nationalism had arrived at a "resolution of the women's question". In fact, they claimed that the measure of the success of that nationalism lay in its ability to organize this "resolution". The secret of it lay in introducing, *à la* European bourgeois thought, a schism in Bengal's social world, cutting it into an interior / home and exterior / world – sort of echoing a 'civil society' and 'state / public sphere' distinction. As Chatterjee and others saw it — it is in this interior world, of 'home' nestled into, and even comprising, the civil society, that the nationalists were able to establish their social hegemony, an appropriate nationalist culture. Here 'tradition', or rather invented traditions — incorporating, mutating and subjugating 'modernity', seen as western / colonial — created an autonomous cultural space, where the home consisting of family life, its daily moral conduct, provided a constructive retreat from the pressures and perils of colonial rule. In the outside or public political sphere, on the other hand, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakravarty and others judged the substantiveness of the national imaginary compromised by the seductions of modernity and colonial discourse. Thus the cultural hegemony of nationalism, manifested in social or civil life, did not achieve a commensurate and authentic political form.²

But whatever the failure at the state / political front, the success at 'home' was seen to be achieved, and women became signifiers of this success. Through a subtle and complex move women's emergence as 'icons' of the nation incorporated the world, the outside, into its form. The notion of the new, nationalist woman could ingest modernity — such as formal education, profession, public cultural participation — into

an overall format of traditionality. This conquest or containment of modernity, of the mores of the world, of requirements of a social / public life, marked the "resolution of the women's question". The new nationalist woman then never left 'home', the bifurcation between the home and the world remained undisturbed; women were signified as wives, and primarily mothers, in the national imaginary.

This conservative, traditional 'resolution' championed by these subalternists has been challenged by feminist scholars, who have shown through various arguments why this is no 'resolution' at all, but actually the subjection of women in the cause of the patriarchal nation.³ This critique has been voiced not only regarding nationalism in India / South Asia, but it is the general substance of feminist critique of nationalism everywhere.⁴ But it is important to note that even this feminist critique has not challenged the notion of nationalism's successful bifurcation of the home and the world; nor has it destabilized the trope of motherhood and nationalism, leaving it intact as supreme and iconic. In not doing so this critique has left unexplored alternative formulations of womanhood in nationalism or women's relationship to or location in the home and the world — thus not noticing the variances in women's subjectivities and women-nation relationships depending upon the nature of the nationalism proposed.⁵

Though I myself have a feminist critique of nationalism and do not dispute the truth of the general critique regarding motherhood and nationalism, I would still like to offer a more nuanced view which extends beyond both the subaltern claim and conventional feminist critique. I propose to do so by pointing out that a venue for women's complex relationship to nationalism is offered by Rabindranath Tagore, especially in his novels and essays. Rabindranath, we should also note, was no friend of nationalism, at least of the variety with which he was most familiar. In his essay on *Nationalism* he said: 'The idea of the nation is the most powerful anesthetic that man has invented. Under the influence of its fumes the whole people can carry out its systematic programme of the most virulent self-seeking without being in the least aware of moral [perversion]'.⁶ Yet it is to this same Rabindranath that we can turn for a view of women and nationalism, because he destabilizes the comfortable home-and-the-world bifurcation and shows that when women exit into the world, they do so with more than interests of home or tradition at heart, not as ultimately derivative agents or subjects at

the behest of a conservative vision of the nation.⁷ They are, in his works, autonomous subjects, not just tamers of modernity in the cause of tradition or national culture. Their emergence into the world is marked through actions, emotions and discourses of anti-traditionality fraught with risk, danger and devastation.⁸ The narrative of their emergence, public, political involvement, is one of transgression, full of jagged edges — rather than one of comfortable resolution. It has to be so, since they break the barriers between the home and world rather than compound them or project them with domesticity and maternal familial roles. They do so with personal passion saturated with a rhetoric of freedom, of desire. They display in Rabindranath's novels a kind of modernity born of questioning of traditions and project an unmitigated uncertainty — rendering complex his portrayal of nationalism at a fictional level.

But before we go on to discuss Tagore's novels, there are a few things to be noted as a preamble. To begin with, the rhetoric of freedom pertaining to women in the national imaginary, like rhetoric in all other contexts, contains ambiguities and ambivalence. As rhetoric it can signal something which ideally should be and is not, and thus has wide and contradictory connotations that exceed the boundaries of the stated or the intended. Thus in the name of freedom it can arouse energies and hopes, subjectivities and agencies, beyond its targeted and specific political scope. Through this arousal it can unleash forces which are even antithetical to the proposed national imaginary and its projected political institutions. Furthermore, what 'freedom' means at different levels also needs to be contextually unpacked. Those who seek it, their expectations, reasons and expressions, need to be carefully explored. Not the least of this exploration involves exploring connections of 'freedom' to desire, nature, reason, society and polity. The point to remember is that though conventionally there is a theoretical opposition advanced between feminism and nationalism, scrutiny reveals that nationalism is not an ideological / political entity of a simple kind. Examined historically and specifically, ventures of nationalism turn out to be plural and complex in nature. Their relationships to women vary accordingly, depending on the social analyses, political stances and objectives which are at work. And, of course, the very fact that projects of nationalism call on women, hitherto locked in the binary of the private and the public, to 'come out' into the public space — in itself has an impulse, a resonance, that cannot be

gainsaid or leashed back. As Radha Kumar's *History of Doing*, regarding women's movements in India, Kumari Jayawardena's *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, or Joanna Liddel and Rama Joshi's *Daughters of Independence* show, the subsequent emergence of feminism as social movement, as well as many of its core ideas, are based on the same rhetoric of freedom or liberatory discourses spun off by anti-colonial nationalism.⁹ Third world feminist thoughts and practices originated in these times and milieux of anti-colonial nationalism. It can even be argued that whatever the specific *political* outcome of a particular anticolonial nationalism, this dynamic female participation, a general politicization of personal and cultural life, in conjunction with social reform movements for women, ended up by providing an impetus for various types of uncharted political-social mentalities, moralities and movements among women.

It should also be noted that only anti-colonial nationalisms deployed the rhetoric of freedom. Unlike European nationalisms (with the exception of Ireland) the tropes of domination and subordination, colonization and resistance are the context and the content of third world nationalisms. As such, Indian nationalist movements would differ from the imperialist nationalisms of colonizing Britain or Nazi Germany. The latter for obvious reasons could not use the rhetoric or language of freedom since it imposed rather than challenged subordination. Anti-colonialism as a generalized desire of freedom from foreign hegemony, is the originary impulse of any third world nationalism. Initially it opens up socio-political spaces for women and many socially suppressed others, which spaces may be closed off or eradicated as the broader anti-colonial impulse gels into proper political parties, defined ideological positions and imaginaries into a state formation and creation of administrative apparatuses. Depending on these explicitly political objectives participatory spaces for women might widen and branch off in uncharted directions or close within prescribed precincts.

There are a few material factors, approaches to which determine the type of nationalism at hand.¹⁰ Nationalisms vary according to their political understanding and intentions towards:

- colonial occupation of lands, peoples and cultures;
- indigenous social organization and relations of class, private property and patriarchy, caste and other power relations;
- the ideology of state formation and structures of governance.¹¹

For example, a nationalism driven by commitment to maintaining relations of class and private property, and shaped by forces of religious fundamentalism, in spite of its anti-colonial or anti-imperialist stance, could not but repress women and other disadvantaged peoples. Liberal democratic nationalism, separating the state from religion, with a polity based on individual rights and citizenship, would hold a different agenda for women in spite of its class and property commitments. These two would, of course, differ from a nationalist struggle which is anti-feudal, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, with an agenda of social and economic equality which could address patriarchy on the very logic of its political project.¹² Common sense dictates that we consider women's relationship to nationalism in these specific and complex terms.

Nationalism, Women and the Novels of Rabindranath Tagore

When we speak of women and nationalism in Tagore's novels, we only speak of India, especially of Bengal, and of the emergence and articulation of nationalism within that space and their inchoate and competing beginnings. The fictional time-space of Tagore's novels extends from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the first three of the twentieth. It marks time between demands for constitutional and representative rule, to the stage of mass political upheavals involving boycott and destruction of colonial economy and institutions, such as of textiles and schools, ending with the emergence of armed small nationalist groups with 'terrorist' tactics including assassinations of colonial officers and their native allies. They are placed in a time when the Indian National Congress (INC) is at its pre-Gandhian phase, a time of struggle among the nationalist groups themselves over divergent agendas and constituencies. They are generally ethnically demarcated, mainly into Hindus and Muslims. The momentum especially centres on the 1905 division of the Bengal presidency by the British in ways that pit Muslims against Hindus. The roots of much of the later religious communalisms may lie in the time culminating in the 1905 Bengal Partition.¹³ Overarching these indigenous political formations there is the all-pervasive presence of colonialism, ranging from the state to the civil society. Both the private and the public sphere of Bengal are thus drawn into a consciousness of domination.

Under these circumstances a rhythm of struggle activated by a rhetoric of freedom fills the environment, and this rhetoric is not only that of negation, of 'us' versus 'them', but it is something larger — of imagining freedom in broad social and political terms. It extends from imagining free subjectivities, agencies and social institutions into dreams of 'our' state and its relations to 'us'. 'Freedom from' and 'freedom to' are conjoined with quests for¹⁴ 'selves' and 'free selves'. This resonates in the acute awareness of all kinds of daily unfreedoms, historical unfreedoms dimly or strongly remembered or even constructed — as, for example, through an Orientalist revisionist history and cultural memory of Muslim rule in India or the glories of the past. Colonial domination becomes the mirror in which other kinds of bondages and oppressions see their faces. So it is that the rhetoric of freedom gains its psychic resonances and expansive socialities, their realm of desire.¹⁵ The projects of social reform for Bengali Hindu women which existed since the mid-nineteenth century, conjoined with the new rhetoric of freedom, take on a sharper edge. And by the last quarter of the nineteenth century women, such as Krishnabhabini Das, become active in expressing their opinions about both indigenous and colonial patriarchal oppression.¹⁶ Towards the end of the nineteenth century women are increasingly politically active, joining existing organizations, and creating others specifically for women. But as they do not abandon their anticolonial stance, social reform for women and anti-colonialism blend into one in their enterprises. Their everyday life becomes saturated with the need for change. The embroideries on their walls, their sense of fashion and food, as well as taste in literature reflect this, as also their support for men engaged in nationalist activities. Some among them support armed militancy and the development of a martial culture among Bengal's, especially male, youth. But in their magazines and books women speak of the tyranny of the patriarchal family sitting in what they called their 'gilded cages'. They liken this tyranny with colonialism, and even imagine a women's utopia, as in Rokeya Sakhawat Hussein's *Sultana's Dream*, where there would be complete freedom from male domination.¹⁷ It is against this backdrop that one has to read Rabindranath's novels. He wrote as a conscious participant in shaping the national imaginary of an "India" and the social culture of Bengal, and was drawn into debates about the status of women started in the

last quarter of the nineteenth century. Given the gigantic scope of his opus, and national as well as international influences on and of his works, my effort to capture his views through the study of a few novels cannot be considered as more than a mere sketch. But these novels are today his most well-known ones and they hold a representational status in echoing themes, issues, concerns and possess a symbolic or iconic apparatus that can be found throughout his works. The novels I have chosen to scrutinize are *Gorā*, *Gharebāire*, *Çaturanga*, and *Çaradhyā*.¹⁸

Let us start by noting that Rabindranath did not fictionalize or narrate the nation by placing women and imagining India, the land and its peoples, within the tropes of motherhood and domesticity. As the feminist critique of nationalism shows, this is exceptional, especially in the context of South Asia, where cultural nationalism with its Hindu under- or overtone has generally done that. I need only signal the nationalist epic, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Ānandamath*, in which motherhood, motherland and nationalism were archetypically instituted not only for Bengal but also the rest of India.¹⁹ Rabindranath, instead, offers us the following woman-nationalism figuration, astoundingly different from Bankim's:

One night I...slipped out of my room onto the open terrace. Beyond our garden and walls are fields of ripening rice. Through the gaps of the village groves to the North glimpses of the river are seen. The whole scene slept in the darkness like the vague embryo of some future creation.

In that future I saw my country, a woman like myself, standing expectant. She has been drawn forth from her home...by the sudden call of some Unknown...I know well how her very soul responds...how her breast rises and falls...She is no mother. There is no call of her children in their hunger, ...no household work to be done...So she hies to her tryst, for this is the land of the Vaisnava poets. She has left home, forgotten domestic duties; she has nothing but an unfathomable yearning which hurries her on...²⁰

So by rejecting the metaphor of motherhood and the familial domestic mode Rabindranath introduced other affective moments recuperating the romance of Radha and Krishna, through which to imagine the nation or the women's role within it. With him the rhetoric of freedom shifts from that of freeing the mother nation from bondage

or of icons of women as heroic or lamenting mothers,²¹ to one where freedom and bondage are imagined through personal and sexual desire and the boundaries between the licit and illicit are swept away. Here individual choice dictating transgression serves as the corollary for freedom. As we see in the quotation, femininity and sexuality are fused in imagining the nation — its emotional geography — and this complicates the theme of women's relationship to nationalism. The narration of nations becomes a story of transgressive passions — of men and women for each other, for the freedom of the nation itself which emerges in this struggle, for death or martyrdom intimately bound with life and death. These passions are all transparently overlaid. They are framed within a story of reason, within the problematic of humanism and a universalist social vision. Individual sexual and political choices and conceptions of freedom are thus imaginatively projected through binaries of nature and reason, domestic and romantic love, action and contemplation, choice and compulsion. The complexity of this view is such that in it nature itself is not a unitary entity and nor is reason. Nature is presented differentially in terms of a Hobbesian-cum-evolutionist interpretation and in terms of a non-narcissistic love and social and familial bonds. It is an ambitious project, therefore, to explore even rudimentarily Rabindranath's view of nationalism, particularly in relation to women.

At this point we must confront a conundrum or even a paradox. As I stated before, Rabindranath was the most powerful critic of nationalism that India produced outside of its communist movement, and probably one of the most significant internationally. And yet anti-nationalist as he was, he was also most profoundly committed to an ideal of de-colonization. This is the puzzle that we have to solve if we are to do justice to his novels. We have to show what he meant by nationalism and decolonization, and how he thought that one could achieve decolonization bypassing nationalism, which he came to consider as a narrow ideology of chauvinism and thus a particularist cultural and political enterprise. We may be helped in this by looking into how he himself phrased the problematic. On 22nd December 1921, in the Visva Bharati inauguration speech on "The Centre of Indian Culture", he showed us both sides of the coin and both their antithetical base:

Let me state clearly that I have no distrust of any culture because of its foreign character. On the contrary, I believe that that shock of outside forces is necessary for maintaining the vitality of our intellect...European culture has come to us not only with its knowledge but with its speed. Even when our assimilation is imperfect and aberrations follow, it is rousing our intellectual life from the inertia of formal habits. The contradiction it offers to our traditions makes our consciousness glow.

What I object to is the artificial arrangement by which this foreign education tends to occupy all the space of our national mind and thus kills, or hampers, the great opportunity for the creation of new thought by a new combination of truths. It is this which makes me urge that all the elements in our own culture have to be strengthened; not to resist the culture of the West, but to accept it and assimilate it. It must become for us nourishment and not a burden. We must gain mastery over it and not live on sufferance as hewers of texts and drawers of book-learning.²²

In unraveling his kind of decolonization we also need to consider the type of nationalism he saw in his lifetime, outlined in Sumit Sarkar's *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*. The paradigm or paradox of decolonization versus nationalism as narrated in the novels, though ostensibly and morally on the side of the universality of decolonization, leaves us curiously aroused and the narration or the problem of decolonization unresolved — as though a shadow of ambivalence were cast on the clarity of his formulation and the choice of his characters.²³ We need to explore how this shadow forms in this fictional space, which calls for a fresh look at Rabindranath's trajectory. Chasing this shadow reveals that he went through important changes in his role in, and his relationship to, Bengal's nationalism. As early as the 1870s, when nationalism had not yet congealed into clear political ideologies, Rabindranath and a great part of the Tagore family actively participated in shaping a cultural response to colonialism in Bengal, which eventually became our 'national culture'. Here, in its early everyday responses to colonial hegemony, he took part in an inchoate, turbulent cultural beginning, which proliferated and congealed into different nationalist ideological stances and political parties in time. By the first decades of the twentieth century the ideological strands ranged from Hindu revivalist to liberal economic, from religio-cultural identities to secular humanist ones.

These ideologies and their practices lived side by side, affecting each other by osmosis. For example, a Hindu cultural nationalism which pre-existed and influenced Gandhi blended in with nationalism's liberal form, giving rise to a secularism markedly different from the Western one. Rabindranath lived through these formative moments of culture, politics and history, himself fully engaged in debates and actions, sorting his way through his own involvement with a Hindu symbolic cultural apparatus and invented history which at one time overdetermined his Brahmo persuasion. But then Brahmoism itself could be understood as a reformed Hinduism with a non-idolatrous monotheism of the Upanishadic universalism of the world soul. To put it concisely, Rabindranath shaped Bengal's nationalist culture and his own view of nationalism in both creating and resisting these divergent ideological and political practices.

Tagore scholars and historians of Bengal's nationalism and counter-hegemonic anti-colonial culture have noted these changes in Rabindranath's views. It is generally agreed that he took a distinctly critical and circumspect stance regarding Bengali nationalism from about 1907/8 in response to a turbulent and eventually violent response to Lord Curzon's partition of Bengal in 1905 and its aftermath. Though he supported resistance against the mutilation of the province, he did not support the ethnicist bias of nationalist activists whose response often pitted Hindus and Muslims against each other in a manner playing into the British divide-and-rule policy. Nor did he approve of actions such as burning of imported British textiles and their persecuting traders, or engaging in armed militancy. Instead he adapted socially-reformist and economic nationalism of a conservative politics and called for a 'constructive *swadeshi*'.²⁴ This amounted to a civil society-based collective social reform and a moral self-development project shunning any quest for power, either over other social groups or the state the hallmarks of political nationalism. Doing quiet good social work, creating a substantive cultural-mental universe without any direct or immediate rebuttal of colonial power, seems to have been his projected goal. He felt that the national imaginary and decolonizing ideals suitable for India were yet to be created and they could not simply be the obverse reflection of Western imperialism. His construct of 'India' was to encompass all the diversity of its peoples and cultures, with a secular

humanism expressive of an openness to all 'others'. It could be inclusive of Western values and cultural forms or aesthetics if they were in keeping with the humanist and universalist ideals of his idea of 'India'.²⁵ As he felt that not everything Western was 'colonial', so he did not wish to uphold all things 'Indian', for example the caste system, irrespective of their intrinsic moral and social implications.²⁶ Synthesis, fusion, transcendence from particularism, whatever term we wish to use, marked Rabindranath's goal of de-colonization. Whatever he had written in his early youth in glowing Hinduized terms about Shivaji and Maratha independence or Sikh militancy against Mughal (Muslim) emperors and Rajput-Mughal conflicts, were left behind by 1908 to narrate a freedom outside of Hindu/Muslim divide, caste oppression and other discourses of power. So in the high noon of Bengal's and India's nationalism Rabindranath emerged as its critic, as the 'great sentinel' of Gandhi — upholding the universalist, humanist secular counterpoint (the tone of the *Upanishads* notwithstanding) — to keep the conscience of Indian nationalism from falling prey to narrow chauvinism.²⁷ Communal strife and other forms of oppression in India itself, the violent nationalism of European colonizing powers and their inter-imperialist wars with millions dead, Japan triumphing over China, claims of Western and Japanese 'civilization' constructed 'over a tower of skulls', all combined to mature and delineate Rabindranath's world view. This was expressed in his correspondence, for example, with the Japanese imperial poet Noguchi. He wrote to Noguchi:

Humanity, in spite of its many failures, has believed in a fundamental moral structure of society. When you speak, therefore, of the 'inevitable means, terrible it is though, for establishing a new great world in the Asiatic continent' — signifying, I suppose, the bombing of Chinese women and children and the desecration of ancient temples and universities as a means China for Asia — you are ascribing to humanity a way of life which is not even inevitable among the animals...you are building your conception of an Asia which would be raised on a tower of skulls...When I protested against 'westernization' in my lectures in Japan, I contrasted the rapacious imperialism which some of the nations of Europe were cultivating with the ideal of perfection taught by Buddha and Christ, with the great heritages of culture and good neighbourliness that went [in]to the making of Asiatic and other civilizations."

But Rabindranath's own journey from passionate Hindu cultural nationalism and the armed militancy of its martyrs to the stage of elaborating a universalist decolonization was not easy or linear, nor, as his novels show, without a visceral struggle. The decolonizing ideals did not come to him spontaneously. The actual experience of colonialism, glimpses of which we encounter in his novel *Gorā*, could only limitedly support his view of the 'good' and the 'bad' British with the 'good' winning over the 'bad'.²⁹ But even though the 'bad' predominated regularly, yet, finally, nationalism as he had seen it in Bengal, Japan or Europe, had to be foresworn. But the struggle involved was enormous. Three of the four novels discussed here are fraught with reversals, revisions, ambivalences and a profound sense of loss and mourning. Though universalism wins out in the end of the story, we find it weeping at the funeral of particularism — of particular loves, desires, passions involving men and women daily. The indigenous cultural and political consciousness, often figured through a feminine persona, which has suffered love and disappointment at the hands of patriarchal and narrow nationalism, is somewhat at a loss to know how to get to the utopia of decolonization, of a freedom uncontaminated by lust for sexual and political power, from the 'fallen' world of colonialism charred by practices of many forms of domination. The decolonizing transition, for Rabindranath, entailed a transcendence from group and familial identification of the nation to one involving a humanist world culture. This meant championing of the conception of the world as one's home — a move in identity from a national Hindu man or woman to a home in the world and a world citizen. But as depicted in the novels, this ideal move lacks a concrete narrative analogue or translation, a daily social and literary aesthetic form. But the deficiencies of the actual particular world and of a self immanent in it are so well depicted that the ideal of something larger and whole which is counterposed to them seems abstract in comparison. An adequate narrative of a practical enactment of the universal is thus lacking. So the leap of faith which he wants us to take from the particular to the universal, from eros to agape, from passion to compassion, from the nation to the world, comes across as didactic and wordy. We are left with the feeling that the universal is still looking for its narrative content, its social concreteness, and remains at the level of wish fulfilment.³⁰

Power, Passion and Ambivalence of Nationalism

Of the four novels considered here, three work out the nationalist problematic directly. The one that does not, *Çaturanga*, situates its narrative in a period of intense nationalist upheaval and armed insurrection in Bengal, the presence of which at times breaks through the surface of the textualization. The crucial issues of sexuality and desire, found in all the novels, unfold in each in a quest for individual freedom and choice, and are structured as plots through the oppositions of body-mind, inner-outer, passion-reason, individualism-sociality. Perhaps this structure of feelings and ideas and their unfolding is best revealed in *Çaturanga*, whose basic formulation of the dilemma and conflicts of desire can be seen as a template for the other novels at the formal level, and thus needs to be discussed.

Çaturanga (Four Parts — suggestive of parts of one body) presents this dilemma of desire in a form that is not so much a story marked by events in time, but in terms of thematics of relations, ideologies and emotions within and among the characters which either implode each other or grope towards a tenuous catharsis. The plot here, as in the other ones, involves two or more men and a central woman figure who are galvanized by her presence into actions, passions and realizations in relation to each other. The issues of choice and compulsion remain core themes, the content of which are subconsciously/existentially lived by the characters as well as consciously cogitated and debated. We might call these novels of Tagore 'novels of ideas', or novelistic forms of morality plays (comparable to discussion plays of George Bernard Shaw), rather than conventional story telling as an exercise in realism, which rely on descriptive depiction and depend upon turns in the plot. They have long discussions on ideas, inner monologues or reflections and a poetic, almost an allegorical, character. They are products of imagination mixed with cerebration. The male characters are defined ideologically in terms of the values or beliefs they stand for, and attendant emotional stances. They are forms of embodiment or types. It is as though the male characters each represent a moral quality and only when taken together could constitute a whole man. The text consists of first-person narrations of three major characters, while one of them is also an omniscient observer. The men are first presented as static character types and are then galvanized by their desires, by a transgressive and conflicted sexual

passion for a woman. The plots centre on two (or even three, in other cases) men who desire the same woman through which by a rhapsodic-mystical passion they reach out to an intangible freedom, in *Çaturanga* of the self, and in others of a self and that of the 'nation'. The heroine in *Çaturanga* is a beautiful, passionate young widow, who is looking for her self while serving as a catalyst for others' passion through these gestures of self-expression. She breaks the boundaries of patriarchal and brahminical moral regulations in order to act out her desire, her passion ultimately undergoing mutations towards a kind of love that exceeds both the physical and the personal. Named Damini (lightning), she thus illuminates in this emotional flash the truth about herself and the male characters and prevalent social mores, and thus projects the novel's problematic of freedom, desire and choice. Driven earlier by the impulses of her sexual attraction, mistaken as love, for the narcissistic male, Sachish, by the time of her untimely death she has come to love the social good represented by her self-chosen life with the man of reason, Sribilash, who had until now only evoked her friendship. All passions spent, her last words to him are: 'I did not get enough of you in this life. I hope that in lives to come we will be together.' Here then is that movement from individualism to the social good, from passion to reason, eros to agape, but this happens at the outermost boundary of her life and experience, where no daily life, no social enactment is possible of this great human love for the good. Damini attains her wisdom at the cost of her life, and Sribilash, finally chosen by her, is left without an object for his own love and social being. The movement of desire for freedom with different meanings and levels which animates these four novels, their journey from reckless abandonment to physical and mystical passions to a choice of reasonable and universal love of humanity, marks this narrative's progression at its clearest.

The tonal and emotional structure of *Çaturanga* also underlies *Gharebâire* (Home and the World), here serving as an explicit critique of nationalism and its contrast with a true decolonization. The novelistic schema interpellates both passionate heterosexuality and politics within the same space. Again we find two men who are friends, Sandip and Nikhilesh, embodying antithetical and overlapping physical and political passion delineated with respect to social awareness and introspective reason. Generally embodying principles of compulsion and choice,

nationalism and decolonization, they are in love with the same woman and involved with the same national question. Bimala, the 'queen bee' as Sandip calls her, is married to Nikhilesh, a benevolent, progressive and modernizing landlord who has seen the destructive side of political *swadeshi* or nationalism, and now only espouses its 'constructive' aspect of local social upliftment.³¹ Though Nikhilesh and Bimala are happily living in an arranged marriage, and he and an English governess have educated Bimala in social, political and literary matters, Nikhilesh is not content. He is a modernist seeking a compassionate conjugality, equal participation of wife and husband within marriage, and wants to introduce Bimala to freedom, to choice.³² He wants to be individually 'chosen' by her outside of patriarchal prescriptive caste/class familial conventions and for her to do so with an active knowledge of the world or society that she inhabits. In order to accomplish this both in her and himself, he introduces into their home a force from the outside world, a figure illuminated by the blazing fires of Bengal partition riots of 1905. This guest/outsider is his old college friend Sandip, a hero of political (read 'destructive') nationalism. Bimala now oversteps the seclusion of *andarmahal* or interior quarters, enters 'the world' (symbolized here by their house's outer quarters, generally inhabited by men) and is swept away by its forces. A sexually charged passion that knows no social or moral boundaries overtakes her, kindled by that of Sandip. Through her desire and admiration for him Bimala is drawn into the violence that rages around them — mob violence of lynching, arson, armed robberies, looting and Hindu-Muslim riots. But Bimala also, like Damini, is not blinded by her passion forever. As she watches herself hurtling into a hell of a natural/sexual compulsion and a disorderly concept of national and individual freedom, she recognizes Sandip for what he is, an ego-driven, violent and amoral man, a greedy seducer who worships an animalistic freedom.³³ Through this relationship her own ruin is complete, but in that process of being stripped to the bare bones of her being, she does make her final and true choice — for Nikhilesh, not Sandip. But as with *Çaturanga*, it may be a little too late for this life, as Nikhilesh has been seriously wounded in trying to protect his Muslim tenants from the predations of Hindu nationalists. As a fire ordeal for the genuineness of his modernity, questioning tenets of traditional masculinity, he has stood by watching the terrible results that his

orchestration of freedom and choice has precipitated in his personal and social environment. In this parable of sexual and nationalist passion Bimala has ultimately chosen the good, and as the embodiment of the nation, which she is frequently called, the nation has chosen constructive nationalism and decolonization over destructive political nationalism. But this does not come about before one aspect of nature in the shape of physical desire and power-driven nationalism has swept all before it as a hurricane devastates a landscape which now awaits regeneration.

This same allegory of passion/nature versus reason/humanism animates *Çarādhya* (Four Chapters), a novella which might also be called a prose poem. Nationalists here, characterized by the anti-hero Indranath, as by Sandip in *Gharebāire*, embody unbridled ego-driven particularism and are the antithesis of transcendence from the personal to the social. Their motive force or ethics are similar in that the urge for power and domination which animates them also characterizes colonialism. The leading male figures of nationalism thus are driven by power hunger and narcissism, and the young and innocent among them who are their victims are inspired by a passion for martyrdom and misled, as Atin, into inverted moral spaces. The animating woman figure, Ela, is both an image of innocence and of quest for power as an expression of self. *Çarādhya* shows us a world in disarray, where small bands of desperate armed men fantasize their freedom in acts of random violence. Hiding among dilapidated ruins of a landlord's country house, Atin and Ela, whose flame-like beauty draws young men to freedom's cause without sexually gratifying them, meet their nemesis, because at the last moment, at the edge of the narrative, Ela falls prey to her own woman's heart. Previously she had urged her lover Atin to sacrifice himself for the cause, but now yields to save him for love, for a greater good. Like Damini or Bimala, her realization of the good, the love within her that directs her to the social, to a protective stance towards the other, comes at the ultimate moment – in a state of desperation at the boundaries of society.

Ambivalence: Nationalism or Decolonization?

For Tagore decolonization is the ideal before mankind for which boundaries of little homes or nations and passions have to be broken, the home-and-world antithesis transcended into a secular universal humanism.

This ideal was sought to be actualized by him in his educational institution Santiniketan, about which he said the following in 1912:

I have in mind to make Santiniketan the connecting thread between India and the world. I have found a world centre for the study of humanity there. The days of petty nationalism are numbered – let the step towards universal union occur in the fields of Bolpur. I want to make that place somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography.³⁴

And yet the novels, paradoxically, are haunted by the power of particularism. The ghosts of personal passions, of self-centred nationalism, are never thoroughly exorcized in them. The rhetoric of freedom, even of false unhallowed natural freedom, fraught with exultation of power and pain, is branded on the reader's consciousness. The admiration for this power, a combination of ruthless masculinity at the core of industrial capitalism, is expressed in Rabindranath's play *The Red Oleanders* by the heroine Nandini for the King who sits self-imprisoned at the heart of his technological empire in the bowels of the gold mines:

BISHU. What was he like?

NANDINI. Like a man from the epics — his forehead like the gateway to a tower, his arms the iron bolts of some inaccessible fortress.

BISHU. What did you see when you went inside?

NANDINI. A falcon was sitting on his left wrist. He put it on its perch and gazed at my face. Then, just as he had been stroking the falcon's wings, he began to stroke my hand gently...Then he buried his fingers in my unbound hair and sat long with closed eyes...I liked it...It was as if he were a thousand-year-old banyan tree, and I a tiny little bird; when I alit on a branch of his and had my little swing, he needs must have felt a thrill of delight to his very marrow. I loved to give that bit of joy to that lonely soul.³⁵

It seems a great ironic reversal when, perhaps even inadvertently, Rabindranath's very criticism empowers that which he seeks to eliminate. When Ela, Bimala or Damini leap across age-old social mores and find themselves in a nameless zone of desire at the end of the world as they know it, they also encounter a kind of universal, that of devastation. Even if Tagore seeks to give them other denouements, what results is a tragic ambiguity. The characters stand at the cusp of an end and a beginning of life. These turbulent chaotic moments wait their form

of an utter extinction or a new life. The questions that face them as women, as embodiments of the nation, as ravaged nature, are those of personal and political identity. At the end of the novel we wonder with them about who they are now. What will they do from now on? What will be the new form of social definition and engagement in which they can participate? Somehow, choosing their good, reasonable husbands or regretting the loss of opportunity to build a personal life and a home together, does not offer a convincing vehicle for the notion of the universal. As readers, it is not Rabindranath's idea of the universal, the social good, the need for a reasonable choice that we dispute, but we do not see this end embodied, expressed and socialized within the narrative's space. Even if we deplore the sado-masochism of the patriarchal sexual and nationalist passions, we still look for an embodied intensity and concreteness of experience and action in the realm of the advocated greater good. A mood of melancholy ambivalence descends upon us.

The pallid, mundane or banal nature of representation of the universal, its general emptiness as embodied social, becomes evident upon reading *Gorā*, the most social and the least sexually driven of these novels. Inverting the story of Kipling's *Kim*, here a white orphaned child is adopted by a Bengali family and becomes an ultra-Hindu nationalist. As he leaps to the most particularist of nationalist chauvinisms, even of glorifying the caste system or communalism in spite of his basic instinct to reject them, we wait for hubris to strike him. As the prevalent nationalism of the time rests on the myth of origin, on notions of blood and belonging, we wonder what will happen when Gora encounters the ordinary truth about himself. And when he does, we find him dropping with surprising alacrity the burden of Hindu nationalism and embracing brahmo ethics of the purest kind, in which the notions of the world soul, universal world brotherhood, love of contemplation provide him with tender refuge. Daily piety and social reform, the good deeds of everyday, a brahmo version of liberal ethics, are to occupy him from now on, in which he will be aided by a like-minded woman, the daughter of his preceptor into the conduct of universalism. This resolution seems rather pious, though entirely commendable, and the issue of national political freedom which earlier preoccupied Gora disappears.

But then, this novel, compared to the others, is the least invested in passion and sexuality. Women feature here as social types of

modernity, girls under the tutelage of a mother in a Jane Austen-like constellation (Baradasundari could have easily descended from *Pride and Prejudice*) and a modern figure who has attained a universal morality through her motherly love. Though sexual attraction is at work, it is muted by appropriate social mores and piety. Neither the two heroines Sucharita and Lalita nor Gora, or his friend Binoy, are devastated by the impact of a passionate transgression, though some superficial social mores are contravened by Lalita in particular, and also by others. The women do not live as conservative high-caste Hindus as in the other novels and are educated. They are 'free mixing' unmarried Brahmo women, who undergo no radical break with tradition when they choose their life partners. They have already had their sentimental education in their familial environment, the modernity of their self-chosen love and marriage does not come as an apocalyptic surprise as in the other novels. Nor are they swept away from the world of modernist social reform to that of chauvinistic armed nationalism in pursuit of the men they love. Marriage, actualized and promised, resolves the small upheavals of social transgression of hindu men falling in love with brahmo women, in fact with parental blessings.

Gorā, then, is what things could look like in this life, in the daily world, if the good, the reasonable, the agape version of love would be pursued, and the politics it advocates signals Tagore's ideal of constructive *swadeshi*. The two heroines, Sucharita and Lalita, do not stand alone under a dark sky, as do the other women figures. Instead we find two adult male and female counterparts, a father and a mother, who hold the children (young adults, couples) by the hand so they will not be lost in the labyrinth of the world. The man of reason and contemplation is an old Brahmo man, Gora's preceptor Paresh Babu, who will refigure in Chandranath Babu in *Gharebāire*, and his complement is Anandamoyee, Gora's mother, with wisdom of the heart, of a pure maternal love, which in adopting a white child has propelled her out of hindu bigotry forever. It is to her that Gora returns after he has taken the vow of the universal 'India'. This novel brings in the otherwise absent theme of motherhood and nation, and in this combination she stands for his ideal construct of 'India' — an India that is a unity of diversity, an ideal of love and acceptance, to be given as a gift to the world. We have moved from the heady mixture of eroticism and

nationalism, or of motherhood as found in Bankim Chandra's goddess of power and the nation, to the love of the good and a humanist decolonization as a universal parental love. Freedom has moved from the stage of 'free from' to 'free to', with a constructive future ahead, to exit from the dark caves of natural passion into kinship with others. A noble, utopian vision — but in practice in narrative terms it amounts to a domestic life of Brahmo Samaj espousing reformist, liberal and non-sectarian values. Protest against destruction wrought by passion has returned us to the older conservative ideals of marriage, hearth and home, albeit dressed in modern clothes of social reform where the individual is significant within the social collective. There has been a note of sanitization introduced into the world of male-female relations, whose crimson has faded into the serenity and pallor of disembodiment.

Conclusion

Perhaps the problem comes from a place that lies outside the scope of the novels themselves — from the epistemological and political standpoints from which Tagore projects his politics and social criticism, that of metaphysics and liberal ethics. To begin with, the notion of the 'universal', as an idealist concept, is by definition best suited to being a spiritual or abstract frame of moral/spiritual reference. It can only be a state of mind, an awareness, a feeling of an unbounded space, rather than a social and material set of relations and practices that can be actualized as actions or daily lived. At an aesthetic level it relies on tonalities and metaphors, but one doubts whether this metaphysical stance can be narrativized. Socio-politically it translates into a quiescent attitude to all forms of conflict. The transcendence itself required for this kind of universality is after all from the very social ground, created through actual relations of power. Thus it is not surprising that Tagore's novels should portray a colonized world and nationalist resistance without almost ever portraying in any great detail foreign cultural or social domination. Nor do British characters feature in the novels, except in the shape of a glimpse of Miss Digby in *Gharebhāire*, a deracinated Gora and some incidents involving Europeans in that novel. Whenever they are spoken about a distinction is maintained between 'good' and 'bad' Europeans. Thus nationalism is imagined and critiqued in terms

of Indians (the colonized) oppressing each other, their power-ridden society, without exploring how the local social formations on the colonial terrain are shaped or exert pressures on popular identity and politics. He does not pose the question in these novels, as he does elsewhere, how an open world culture or constructive *swadeshi* could develop in an environment of active colonial domination on all levels. His novels leave us with the impression that colonial domination is an extraneous matter to the Bengali/Indian society, just as he considers nationalism to be an alien political ideology for India. An ideal imaginary of 'India', it seems, could flourish under a colonial state. It also leads us to believe that armed resistance could have no other politics except that of small cells of desperate assassins. This approach is not consistent with Tagore's disappointment with British rule elsewhere in his writings and often in deepest terms of judgment. The rejection of his knighthood expresses some of this disappointment:

Your Excellency. [Lord Chelmsford]

The enormity of the measures taken by the Government in the Punjab for quelling some local disturbances has, with a rude shock, revealed to our minds the helplessness of our position as British subjects in India. The disproportionate severity of the punishments inflicted upon the unfortunate people and the methods of carrying them out, we are convinced, are without parallel in the history of civilised governments, barring some conspicuous exceptions, recent and remote. Considering that such treatment has been meted out to a population, disarmed and resourceless, by a power which has the most terribly efficient organization for destruction of human lives, we must strongly assert that it can claim no political expediency, far less moral justification. The accounts of insults and sufferings undergone by our brothers in the Punjab have trickled through the gagged silence, reaching every corner of India, and the universal agony of indignation roused in the hearts of our people has been ignored by our rulers — possibly congratulating themselves for what they imagine as salutary lessons. This callousness has been praised by most of the Anglo-Indian papers... The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in their incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen, who, for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings.³⁶

The same condemnation is heard in his rejection of colonial education or cultural mimicry, extending to the translations of his own works.

Translations, however clever, can only transfigure dancing into acrobatic tricks, in most cases playing treason against the majesty of the original. I often imagine apes to be an attempt by the devil of a translator to render human form in the mould of his outlandish idiom. The case may be to some extent different in European languages which, in spite of their respective individual characteristics, have closely similar temperaments and atmospheres, the western culture being truly a common culture.

As for myself, I ought never to have intruded into your realm of glory with my offerings hastily giving them a foreign shine and certain assumed gestures familiar to you. I have done thereby injustice to myself and the shrine of Muse which proudly claims flowers from its own climate and culture.³⁷

Tagore's proposal of decolonization as presented in these novels, due to its lack of a materialist and historical critique, cannot present us with an anti-colonial struggle which needs to be both against imperialism and semi-feudal capitalism of Indians themselves. It lacks, because of its metaphysical or idealist and purely liberal standpoint, an ability to cope with actual relations of power, an exploration of connections between consciousness with social and historical materiality. The formulation of his criticism in moralistic-idealist terms strips the problematic of anti-nationalism of its social and quotidian complexity. To the degree that he wants to address a current and pressing actual situation, his novels pose it through stories of personal interactions of sexuality and desire. This device works well for portraying only some aspects of problems with nationalism. But even here the primality of this unto-death struggle of nature and reason simultaneously opens and closes the ground for critique. Consequently the image of a universal humanity floats over a fallen world, missing the step of transition which would show us how to get there from where we are. In narratives which leave us with a generous modernist landlord, a deracinated Irishman, a Bengali middle class man and a woman with liberal values, as protagonists of decolonization and a moral imperative of being 'good', one can not find much social or cultural direction. Under these circumstances 'freedom', an essentially political concept, seems to be a feel-good state of the mind with the bars of the social and colonial prison mostly intact.

The poetry of his prose sweeps the reader away through the transmission of the splendour and violence of passion, the ambiguity of desire, rather than the calm of resolution and transcendence.

Yet, outside of the scope of the novels, as Gandhi leads India in a mass movement, as World War I ravages Europe, World War II begins to be shaped and Nazis and fascists, Western and Eastern, become bearers of 'civilization', and Rabindranath visits the Soviet Union, returning with admiration for the transformation of peasants and workers there, his view of decolonization grows richer, more complex. The problematic of decolonization shifts from the metaphoric and the rhetorical level of freedom to other possibilities of organizing resistance. But that is another story — to be told another time.

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